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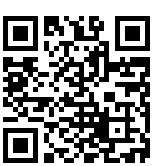

WILD HARVEST

JOHN M. OSKISON

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WILD HARVEST

A NOVEL OF TRANSITION DAYS IN OKLAHOMA

By JOHN M. OSKISON

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK LONDON MCMXXV

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CHAPTER I

THE DAWN OF A PRAIRIE EPOCH

NAN FOREST yawned her young protest against getting up as the fumbling fingers of a July dawn first touched her face. With bolder strokes, the fast mounting daylight brought her wide awake, recalled the day's task she had set for herself; quickly she flung sheet and counterpane aside, to roll out of bed and fall skillfully on hands and feet with a thump that shook the floor of her attic room.

"You ain't up, are you, Nancy?" Susan Dines's amused, shrill response came from below. "Get dressed soon's you can; your Uncle Billy's already out to the barn."

"All right, Aunty." Nan flung her nightgown on the bed, stood before the open south window to feel the faintly cool caress of a new morning wind blowing in from the prairie as she brushed and braided her hair. She poured water from a galvanized iron bucket into a tin basin, twisted her braids into a knot on top of her head, plunged her face into the basin, then vigorously swabbed her slender body. Swiftly she dried

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herself and began putting on her clothes, making rapid progress until she came to the stockings. Here she hesitated, frowned and, perched on the edge of the bed, stretched trim, muscular legs to observe regretfully that they were losing the last of their sun-brown.

"Darn!" she lamented. Two months before, on her fifteenth birthday, Aunt Susan, backed by her father, had decreed that she must wear stockings and shoes even in summer on the farm. A tyrannical, illogical decree! If, on the tenth of May, she had unquestioned license to range the prairie astride Bess's Dolly, bare legged, blue denim drawers well above her knees and skirt a mere suggestion, why should she have ceased to be a child on the eleventh of May, or the sixth of July, for that matter? She was still a child, only the folks wouldn't admit it; and vague as her aunt had been in her explanations, Nan knew that argument would be useless.

"Nancy," the old woman said, "you're growin' up; taller'n I am this minute. Didn't hardly realize it, did you?" She continued her affectionate, proud appraisal: "Child, you're goin' to be pretty in your slim way! You've got your poor ma's thick Titian (she said Ty-ten) hair, the Forest legs, an' teeth that'd make a she-wolf jealous."

A lot Nan cared whether she was going to be pretty or not! She had yielded to stockings and shoes, but had rebelled against longer skirts and laughed at Aunt Susan's persuasive hint: "I wouldn't wonder if you

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had a regular beau soon's you let down your skirt."

"I don't want a beau, and I don't want skirts that trip me." A reasonable protest, considering that she spent nearly all of the daylight hours in summer, when she was not at school, out of doors helping her father.

Nan's face was oval except for a slight broadening of the high cheek bones; a sun-freckled nose sloped straight from between wide set, dark blue eyes and abundant brows to full, laughter-haunted lips; her exquisitely modeled chin cut sharply inward to the brown column of her throat set between shoulders still noticeably hollowed. At the end of rounded and ripplingly muscled arms, her hard-palmed hands seemed as yet slightly exaggerated in size. Her fingers were supple, slender. Her body was erect and flat, like that of a boy athlete.

"Hello, Aunty!" As she entered the kitchen, where Susan Dines was slicing cold boiled potatoes for frying in bacon fat, Nan was tying her braids with a short length of coarse black ribbon. She leaned forward impulsively to kiss her aunt's plump neck, exposed under smoothly up-drawn and coiled gray hair. The old woman turned, wiped her hands on the full length, freshly ironed apron she wore and swung the girl around to inspect the row of dress buttons down her back.

"Only two that ain't buttoned this mornin'," she exulted softly, fastening them. Nan spun about and

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stood for a time silently watching her beloved aunt, a stout gray veteran of the last frontiers, fit representative of those helpmeet women who followed their men into hostile Indian country, cooked buffalo tongue and hump, and cheerfully endured sieges and privations. At sixty-six, she stood vigorously erect on broad feet, with serene confidence in the power of common sense and love to make life sweet. When Nan spoke again she held out to her aunt a thin, folded, and soiled paper-covered book.

"See what I found in Dad's overcoat pocket while I was brushing his clothes at our house yesterday."

Susan Dines took the book, glanced at its lurid title, "Hell on Wheels; or, the Terror of Fiddler's Gulch," and at the cover, a colored drawing of a broad-hatted, long-coated and fiercely mustached two-gun man dealing death and noble reproaches to three dastardly hellions who had evidently attempted to ambush him. Nan went on hastily:

"I didn't read it, but I showed it to Tom and he laughed and said, 'Hot dog, Sis, your Dad sure knows good readin'!' I told him I'd thank him not to make fun of Dad!"

"Trash!" Her aunt lifted a lid from the small wood stove and dropped the book on the fire. "Tom Winger's right to make fun of such truck. . . . Your pa's always readin' blood an' thunder stuff, can't get it into his head seemingly that you can't go hip-hippin' through life like them books says." She stooped to in-

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spect a pan of browning biscuits in the oven, straightened to smile at Nan, her momentary irritation vanishing, and asked:

"Tom didn't change his mind about goin' back to Texas?"

"No," Nan answered, a fleeting shadow of disappointment crossing her eyes. "He got another letter from Gabe Horner offering to make him straw boss on the ranch and pay him fifty dollars a month. He went in to Big Grove last night to telegraph. . . . But look here, Aunty," and Nan returned to the condemned book, "what's the matter with a book like that? I'll bet it's interesting if Dad likes it."

"Don't really know if it's interestin' or not," Susan Dines argued calmly. "I never could read one, nor you can't either. All I know is it's cheap trash, worst kind. It's hard enough to get your pa down to work without havin' a book like that layin' handy to toll him off into a corner somewhere, leavin' you to do the chores as well's the housework, an' half the work in the field, too. I hate to say it of my own brother, but it's so—an' you know it!"

"Aunty, I won't listen to such things about my Dad!" Nan's swift, passionate challenge, the tear-clouded eyes touched the old woman.

"All right, honey lamb." Gently her aunt pushed her to the door. "Now go out to the barn an' tell your Uncle Billy he'd better come a-runnin' if he wants his biscuits hot."

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A big voice from the gloom of the stalls responded to Nan's call:

"Ain't fed yet, Nancy; been busy curryin' an' harnessin'. You pile into the corn crib an' shuck out forty-eight ears—no, make it fifty—ten for Bess—she'll need 'em if you're goin' to get that twenty acres raked to-day."

"All right, Uncle Billy." She kicked a round bushel basket along the narrow aisle between the rows of stalls and set it under the door of an abutting crib. As she pulled down ears from the sloping mass of unhusked corn and stripped them, she shrilled a question:

"Uncle Billy, do you believe Dad's going to bring up two hundred head of steers from Texas?"

"Sure said he would, anyway!" boomed Billy Dines as he came into the aisle over a manger—a gray-bearded, plump little man of seventy in straw hat, broad-checked shirt, blue overalls supported by wide sweat-stained suspenders, and high square-toed boots.

"I *know* he will," Nan insisted; and presently: "That's another thing I've got against Tom; he just stood there and grinned when old Sam Davis said he'd eat all the steers Dad brought from Texas—for breakfast!" Billy Dines laughed as he dragged the basket away to distribute the corn to six whinnying horses.

They left the barn together, Nan's hand in her uncle's, in the luminous pink of the midsummer dawn. He looked sidewise at her flushed face, her up-flung head, felt the hard pressure of her fingers and changed

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his mind about discussing Chester Forest's plans. He offered instead:

"I'm sorry Tom's made up his mind to go back to that ol' Texas boss of his. He's young, an' green at farmin', but he'd make a good hand in time; an' he's a nice feller." He lingered in opening the barnlot gate. "What else you got against him, Nancy?"

Nan met his shrewd smile frankly.

"Oh, nothing much," and, losing her sense of grievance as she followed her uncle through the gate, "Tom says there's going to be a lot more money in cattle than farming in this country. He's going back to see if he can't get Gabe Horner interested. He and Sam are through plowing corn, and he says it's the best time to quit us, says he doesn't know the first thing about hay."

"Sam'd soon learn him! . . . Well, Sue, I'll be ready for breakfast time you get it on." He bustled through the kitchen, a tin basin in hand, to secure hot water from a kettle that steamed on the back of the stove.

Soon after sunrise, Nan was at her father's leasehold.

Three years before, Chester Forest with his wife and young daughter came into the Indian country and leased from Jake Quickrabbit, a placid three-quarter-blood Cherokee, the right to open up a farm, break out prairie land, build a house and make necessary improvements. In this he followed Billy Dines's example.

Nan's frail mother died in the raw dull weather of

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their first spring in the long grass country. After her loss, Forest struggled on faint-heartedly, and what he had accomplished made a poor enough showing:

A two-room wooden house, not yet weatherboarded or ceiled; a small yard enclosed by a slack barbed wire fence, over which rioted wild grass and weeds except where Nan had redeemed two patches for a few bush roses, gooseberry plants, sunflowers and pansies, for potatoes, onions, beans and peas; a rickety stable with a thick layer of rotting hay for a roof in a second wire enclosure; a sagging corn crib constructed of poles laid up worm-fence fashion; a shallow and uncertain well; and beyond the house and barn, a forty-acre field, enclosed by a wabbly fence of leaning posts and rusting wire, sloping gently eastward towards Walnut Creek. Only half of the forty had been plowed; and in the fresh black soil horseweed and cockleburrs already strove to bury the badly cultivated corn.

Between the Dines and Forest fields stretched a half mile of rank wild grass; north of Dines's place, south of Forest's and west of both, the prairie continued unbroken as far as the eye could reach, except for intervening threads of timber-bordered creeks. The two were true outpost farms. East of them ran Walnut Creek, east of the creek was a region of scattered farms, with Big Grove as its trading center and metropolis. A mile south of Forest's farm and half a mile east, Little Walnut Creek flowed into the main stream after twisting its way for twelve miles from

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rolling upland. Westward its sheltered bottoms and its outlying blackjack groves harbored a few Indian, mixed blood and white families. These had hesitated to brave the exposed prairie, preferring to hack out their tiny fields from cut-over bottom lands and build their log houses in the shelter of the woods.

Leading toward the farms from Big Grove, a rough road forded Walnut Creek near the junction, skirted Little Walnut for six miles, crossed, and then struck out across more miles of old buffalo range. It topped a limestone bluff thrust out into the prairie like a rugged and much indented coast line, rounded the blackjack, elm- and sumach-bordered sources of several little creeks and finally dipped down to Thunder Creek and a string of scattered houses marking another mixed settlement.

Ever since she came to Walnut Creek, the quadrant of luxuriant prairie that spread on and on in an infinitely widening sweep to the horizon drew Nan's eyes and quickened her imagination. She had ridden over some of it with her father; and since early spring, when Tom Winger came up from Texas, she had gone farther afield with Tom. He was twenty-four; and he had been a regular cowboy, with his own string of ponies, for six years before deciding in a moment of restlessness to "pull his freight for the Indian country." He worked for Dines, called Nan "Sis"; told her wonderful tales of the big G. H. ranch near San Antone, of the wild long-horned and long-legged dun

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steers that covered the Texas ranges; he sang "Sam Bass," the Texas classic, for her; laughed with a fascinating wrinkle of his sunburned nose and a narrowing of blue eyes; and wore a blue flannel shirt down the front of which ran a row of small embroidered red stars; and he yearned for his old occupation.

Brief winter terms at the Big Grove school four miles away—setting off on horseback before sunrise and returning at dusk—scarcely interrupted Nan's devoted care of her father or her work on the farm. She loved the struggle, as her father hated it. She loved the black soil, the outflung miles of wind-tossed grass; they seemed to beckon her with friendly fingers. Even from the faint-hearted beginning her father had made, Nan believed that great things could come; and that, with the arrival of the two hundred steers which Forest had gone to buy in Texas, they would cross the threshold to fortune.

Cattle were new to the long grass country; only within the last two years had certain enterprising mixed-bloods, with a few white cattlemen who had married women of Indian blood, imported considerable herds. The steers which Forest meant to ship up would be held in the name of Jake Quickrabbit, tribal law still forbidding white ownership.

After hitching Bess to a post and drawing water in a tin bucket to fill the chickens' shallow drinking trough, Nan went to her garden patch. She had an hour for the work before the dew dried from the

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twenty acres of hay which her uncle had cut the day before; and as she weeded and hoed she translated into definite, cheering figures her father's rosy dream.

Dad would bring up two hundred young steers—two year olds—which would be charged against him by the seller at fifteen dollars apiece. There would be freight charges, too, and the cost of holding them here for a year; winter feeding, wages of a cowboy for some months, the cost of shipping to the St. Louis market. Say the total ran up to twenty-five dollars a head. As three-year-olds, the fat steers ought to weigh out at least a thousand pounds (Tom Winger thought they'd do better); at five and a half cents a pound (Tom thought "the price of cattle ought to be a heap better next summer"), they would fetch fifty-five dollars apiece. That would mean thirty dollars of clear profit. Her dad expected to distribute half of this between the Texas cattleman and Jake Quickrabbit in the proportion of three to one. Dad's half would amount to three thousand dollars. A tidy capital!

Hoeing steadily, she dreamed on. Next year, Dad could buy outright another two hundred steers, all of the profit on which, except for Jake's eighth, would belong to him. When the second herd went off to market, there would be enough money to send her to college in St. Louis to study elocution. Nan would be past seventeen then. Meanwhile, she would try to get into the Academy that was to open at Big Grove in October.

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Yes, she would go away to study elocution; she'd give readings for money some day, become a Chautauqua entertainer, might—and here her thought turned to Jessie Mae Gregg, who had left Big Grove four years ago and was now starring in comic opera. Nan, too, might go on the stage; she would live in great cities; when Dad retired from the cattle business he would come and live with her.

Leave the prairie? A wave of homesickness passed over her dream; but she would return for long, glorious vacations!

Into the very blood and fiber of her body Nan had absorbed the prairie's magic. She had caught its thin note of daybreak ecstasy as, in early spring, she faced it shivering, watching wild ducks in flight; or, at dusk, listened to the clamorous shrieking of peepers in rain pools and along the edge of Walnut Marsh. How she loved it, when later its trillions and quadrillions of young grass banners hid the burnt-over land and its green carpet was tinted with pale larkspurs, blue ageratum, wild verbenas in the wet places, fuchsias on the slopes of the draws. Her bare feet had been soothed or scratched by its hidden strawberry vines, its brown creepers, its wild roses. Her quick ears had caught its music from fantailed meadow larks spilling brief song fragments as they soared, from bubbling throated thrushes swaying on stiff weed-tops, and booming prairie cocks; her eyes had widened and sparkled at the sight of miles and miles of undulating seas of

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shining, dew-wet spider webs spun from grass-top to grass-top. Sights and sounds that, given the responsive heart, were certain to sink deep into the soul.

But there was also a personal factor. Nan had listened to the older men among the Indians who visited her father or spent the night at the Dines farm, heard them discuss the problems raised as the whites poured into the land. She knew what her own people said, the white families who settled nearby; and knew the hopes and ambitions of those others who pressed still further westward with visions of wealth gained from cattle, from coal, from asphalt beds—a few already talked of gas and oil.

It was a world in the making, and even a child caught the stir and splendid promise of it.

"You can't keep the white man out," her uncle would tell the old men, "but you can make friends of 'em. Now there's Vergil Stokes, ain't he a good friend of the Indians?" A nod of agreement from all present, and Billy Dines would add: "And Vergil's only one of many!"

The Stokes brothers, Vergil and Harvey, had come into the territory at the same time as the Forests. They had settled on Thunder Creek, where Vergil had married an Indian half-breed girl, Jennie Gourd, educated at a seminary maintained by the tribe, and had become active in tribal politics. Vergil was a visible, practical link between the two races.

"And Jennie," Nan thought, "is a mighty sweet wife

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to him. I like her; she's a real friend; and why can't we all be friends?"

Nan's thought, though she did not know it, was echoed by most of the invading whites; she stood on the edge of a new experiment on the last of the Great West's frontiers, and felt its thrill.

With an amused chuckle at her flying thoughts, Nan finished the hoeing and ran to harness Bess to the sulky rake and begin the work of preparing next winter's feed for two hundred hungry steers that were to make the Forest fortune. She went at the task with an eager lift of her head, a forward thrust of her young body, a proud light in her eyes.

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CHAPTER II

A PRODIGAL FATHER

AT a corner of the long rectangle of six-foot swaths which Billy Dines's mowing machine had laid down the day before and which breathed out a delicious odor as it wilted to pale green crispness, Nan let down the clattering, in-curving teeth of the rake and urged Bess to a fast walk. The new hay rolled up with a gently hissing sound, and Bess strained to the increasing pull of its weight. Thrilling to the work, Nan swung vigorously forward to trip the rake with her foot and, grasping the hand lever, lift its teeth. A neat twelve-foot roll of hay dropped, the beginning of a windrow, Nan's first proud contribution to future family fortune.

She spared it a fleeting backward glance, then set her eyes ahead to the beautiful broad ribbons that stretched beyond Bess's ears. She was aware of happiness; it raced through her, flooding active brain and slim, fit body! It was a day of dry, radiant sunshine. A hay-scented south wind blew across her face with a steady, purring caress; fat meadow larks straddled awkwardly over the thick swaths in front of Bess, rose with lazy flirts of yellow tails to smooth flight.

Crowded into a remote background of consciousness

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were all of the disturbing impressions of her beloved father as a fumbler at realities that had disquieted her since her mother's death.

It was only that Dad was different from her uncle; impatient of slow-growing things, experimental. Anyway, it wasn't reasonable to expect everybody to move at the same speed in the same direction. He wasn't a farmer, but with cattle—Nan smiled confidently. He'd show them!

By eleven o'clock, she had been round the mowing twenty times. Lengthening windrows were calling for bull-rakes and stacker. Sam Davis, pessimistically digging his heels into the sides of Uncle Billy's tall bay, appeared. Nan stopped to give Bess a breathing spell, jumped down and, with a wisp of hay, began flicking the voracious, close-clinging green-head flies from the mare's belly.

"Time we was gettin' this hay in," Sam observed, hooking a knee over the "Giraffe's" high withers and shoving a battered and sweat-stained hat back on his grizzled hair. "I'll ride on back to your uncle's an' start the outfit over here."

"How much will this piece make, Sam?" Nan turned to ask.

"More'n your pa'll ever feed," he answered gloomily. Nan's eyes widened and flashed.

"That isn't so, Sam Davis, and you know it! We'll need two hundred tons, and there isn't twenty here."

"No; about eighteen, I sh'd say. Still, I'm a-tellin'

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you"—he favored Nan with a drooping, cryptic smile —"your pa won't never feed this hay to any cattle of his'n. I know what I'm a-talkin' about, Nan; it come to me in a vision. More'n I can tell you." He turned his head aside, spat annoyingly between the "Giraffe's" ears and swung his long leg back to dangle as he resumed his astride position. Nan climbed to the seat of the rake, started Bess on the shortening round. To Sam Davis's retreating back she cried a passionate:

"Oh, you and your visions—I hate you!"

Her hot resentment lasted until he was out of sight. It gave way to a picture, peopled and vivified by her quick imagination, of a day when old Sam would appear, hat in hand, on the vine-embowered front porch of the big Forest house to beg for a job. Dad would turn him away, but before he stepped off the porch she would come out in her cool white dress and low silver-buckled slippers to intercede:

"Be kind to the old man, Dad; let him go and talk with our foreman, Mr. Winger." Old Sam would turn grateful eyes to her, and bow his head when she added gently:

"Now you see how wrong you were, Sam. The Forest cattle are grazing on a thousand hills!"

Then Nan laughed. Her day dream, even though she half believed in it, amused her; and she began to watch eagerly for Uncle Billy with the stacking outfit.

It came, two bull-rakes loaded on a wide hay frame, the stacker on another wagon, convoyed by her uncle,

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Sam Davis, a yellow-haired boy to drive the stacker team, two half-breed Indian sons of Abel Madden to run the bull-rakes and Fritz Engel, a short, broad-beamed German, who was to help Sam on the stack. By noon everything was set to begin.

By mid-afternoon, with the stacking crew rapidly transforming the windrows into a bulging rick and Billy Dines on the clattering mowing machine laying low another rectangle of hip-high grass, Nan finished raking the first twenty acres. She unhitched and rode Bess to the stack, to watch for a time the smooth working of the crew gathered by Billy Dines, to be paid by Billy Dines, for putting up her father's hay. The thought troubled her; but Dad would repay Uncle Billy when his steers were marketed.

Nan rode back to her father's place planning her work for the rest of the afternoon. Sam Davis and Tom Winger, who had occupied the house since her father's departure for Texas and her own removal to Aunt Susan's, had left it in a mess. She would have to clean the kitchen, polish the stove, sweep and air the bedroom. First, however, she would explore mangers, stable roof, the high cool space under the floor of the house and the patch of jimson weeds for eggs, feed the chickens and the pig.

She stabled Bess, gave the mare an armful of hay which she had carried in, and went about her tasks.

Busy with the stove, she had a vivid memory of her father sitting between it and the window, chair

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tilted backwards, a folded paper-covered book held high to catch the fading light.

"Supper about ready, Nancy?" he would ask in an abstracted tone when she flung back the oven door and released an odor of baking biscuits.

"Will be in a minute, Dad," she would answer. "Have you got the chores done?" He would put down his book reluctantly and go out, a light of happy unreality in his grayish-blue eyes, an unconscious lift of pride and purpose, inspired by his reading, on his thin face. After supper, sometimes, he would wipe the dishes and tempt Nan from her school books to play seven-up, casino or pitch. An hour later, he would rise, stroke his red mustache, yawn, take a drink of water and retire to bed in the other room. As he pulled off his boots, he would sing with soft intensity:

"Wait till the clouds roll by, Jennie,
Wait till the clouds roll by!"

a pathetic couplet of hope. He would call out from the darkness:

"Sleep sound, Nancy baby!" She would go in to kiss him and whisper:

"'Night, Daddy boy!" It had been her mother's intimate protective term; and what a lot of love and protective understanding he needed!

A crayon enlargement of her mother's picture hung over Nan's narrow bed that stood at the other end of the kitchen from the stove. It showed her at thirty,

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hair smoothed back from a broad forehead, cheeks suggestively hollow, in a plain tight-sleeved black dress, with a lace collar fastened at the throat by a large oval brooch. Consumption had taken her at thirty-five, after years of valiant struggle. As Nan wiped the cheap gilt frame with a soft cloth, she remembered Aunt Susan's quiet words when her mother's thin fingers finally relaxed their hold on hers:

"Your ma's at rest now, Nancy lamb." Surely she had earned rest!

Nan blinked away the gathering tears and confronted herself in the small square mirror over the tiny shelf built to hold her own brush and comb, comparing her features with those of the crude portrait. Likeness of oval face, but where the living face was brown, vivid, glowing, the pictured one had been pale, overstrained and weary, except for the eyes that had held to the end that same unquenchable spark that flashed back from the mirror.

Nan passed through to the bedroom, raised the window and set to work. Her mother's frail body had been carried from that room, and Dad had come back to it from the graveyard at Big Grove to sit for a long time intoning bits of the song which solemn-faced neighbors had sung in the windy March dusk:

"We shall gather at the river,
The beautiful, beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God!"

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Since that day he had slumped. In a sudden panic of self-reproach, Nan wondered if and how she had failed in the task her mother had left to her?

She came upon a small stack of paper-covered books on a shelf, a collection that she had scarcely glanced at as she recovered them from the dust under her father's bed on the day he left for Texas. Now, with the memory of Aunt Susan's caustic condemnation fresh in her mind, she examined them one after another. Their lurid covers were wonderfully composed effects in yellow cellar lamplight and spurting red flames from deadly pistols; nightmare effects. Their titles were equally lurid:

"Betrayed to Lust; or, The Cobbler's Daughter"; "To-La-Ka the Comanche; or, A Beautiful Captive"; "A Soul in Torment; or, The Unwilling Bandit."

She opened one and read:

Twirling his cane with an air of studied insolence, Bertram Maltravers flung back the door of John Hobart's humble tenement dwelling.

"Ah, my good woman," he said haughtily as Mrs. Hobart tremblingly confronted him, "I would have speech with you."

He smiled, a snake-like look of cunning on his face.

"Won't you sit down, sir?" she quavered. "My husband is busy in the basement shop; I will go and call him."

But Maltravers hissed:

"You know very well that I am not here to bandy words with John Hobart. You and I must have a plain talk to-day about—"

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"Yes, I know. About Dorothy, my daughter. God help me!"

The cry was wrung from her against her will, for had she not—

Nan replaced the book on the shelf, a frown on her face. It wasn't at all like the world in which she, Aunt Susan and Uncle Billy lived. But maybe her father didn't care as much as they did for everyday things.

Tom Winger's voice, calling from the kitchen door, startled her.

"Hello, Nan! Come out here a minute." She ran to meet him.

"I thought you'd already left for Texas!" she cried.

"Not yet." He grinned uneasily. "Expect I'll go to-night. I thought I'd better come an' tell you somethin' first." He hesitated. "It's about your Dad, Nan. . . . Listen." As he talked, his troubled eyes avoided hers, and he drew a quirt nervously through his fingers.

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CHAPTER III

LIVING A MELODRAMA

"YOUR dad ain't showed up here to-day?" The very quietness of Tom's question alarmed Nan.

"Has he come back?" She made an impulsive forward step.

"Yes, but I ain't seen him. Hank Redbird—you know he's town marshal at Big Grove an' a friend of mine—was tellin' me. Seems he was down by the stockyards early this mornin' an' saw your Dad climb down out of a stock car an' beat it out of town by a back way. Then two fellows came in on the ten o'clock passenger train from Texas. . . . Well—"

"Oh, go on, Tom; what is it?" Nan's eyes compelled his for a moment, but he dropped his gaze again as he went on:

"Hank's a good friend of mine, an' he hunted me up to tell me them two are officers from Fort Tyler. Your Dad was at Fort Tyler, wasn't he, Nan?"

"Yes. What else did Hank say?"

"They're after your Dad. Seems like he had some trouble with a man an' pulled out. These here marshals from Texas hunted Hank up an' showed him

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their authority, but Hank didn't tell 'em he'd seen your Dad. Still—"

"Where do you think Dad is?" Nan demanded.

"Well," Tom replied deliberately, "if it was me lookin' for him, I'd go down to the Little Walnut Road south of here an' whistle; though I don't think it'd do *me* any good to whistle—see?"

"Yes. Oh, what had I better do, Tom?" Nan was gripping his arm.

"I was wonderin' if I ought to tell Mr. Dines?" Tom's suggestion was tentative.

"What do *you* think?" Nan asked.

"Well, I was figurin' it out this way. You could tell your uncle to-night, an' maybe. . . . Looks to me like the best thing is to wait for him to show up. Of course," Tom lied reluctantly, "I don't know what they want your Dad for, but I sh'd think he'd need time to think things over. . . . If there's a chance for me to help in any way, Nan?"

"I don't see how you could, Tom." Nan's words came from between tight-shut teeth, advertising the effort she was making to crush down the panic fear that was rising in her breast. "Anyway," and she called upon the fine courage in her own heart to sustain her faith in her father's courage, "whatever it is, Dad'll face it!"

"I bet he sure will!" Tom's assent was prompt and forceful, though he believed nothing of the kind. He stood silent for a time, shifting restlessly. "Well,"

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he ventured, "I'll be ridin' if you don't think I ought to stay."

"No, don't stay, Tom; go on to Big Grove an' take the train just as if you didn't know anything."

"Yes, that's the thing to do, but I sure don't like to leave you this way. . . . Well," he removed the glove from his right hand, gripping Nan's with it a bit timidly, a look of pride in his eyes at her self-control—an instinctive acknowledgment of a change in the girl. She was Nan now, not "Sis," meeting a difficult crisis with sense and courage. He resumed cheerfully: "You'll sure see me back here some of these days! I'm goin' to fetch Gabe Horner up here next spring if I have to hog-tie the old timer an' ship him up in a caboose. We're sure goin' to have some G. H. steers out on this long grass. . . . Give my regards to your Dad—an' good luck, Nan!"

She released the work-hardened hand of her friend and whispered, as he turned to go to his horse:

"Good luck yourself, Tom!"

She sat on the kitchen doorstep to think over carefully what Tom had told her, to fight off the fear that was clutching at her heart. Her Dad was somewhere near the Little Walnut Road, concealed in the bordering woods, waiting until after dark to come to Uncle Billy's. . . .

Did he know that the officers from Fort Tyler were at Big Grove? Oughtn't he to be warned? Perhaps the Texans were watching the road? But Nan had

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said, and she believed, that he would face his trouble. Then what had she to fear from going to him?

The result of her deliberations was that half an hour before sunset Nan closed the kitchen door and set off on foot along the rough wagon track that led to Little Walnut Road. If he was there and watching the road, he would see her coming. . . .

She walked slowly, pretending, in obedience to an instinctive childish inspiration, to examine the sagging wire and leaning posts of the quarter mile of fence she skirted. Under the surface of her concern for her father ran a current of vivid memories: she had held every one of these insecurely planted posts with her twelve-year-old hands while her Dad, standing in the rear end of the wagon, pounded them into the rain-soaked sod with a sixteen-pound iron sledge hammer. She had helped to stretch the wire and staple it to the posts; not an expert job, for many of the staples had fallen out. Inside the fence, in the midst of the struggling corn, rank cockleburs and tall horse-weed rose to reproach her for not taking time from school in early spring to fight them with a hoe.

She passed beyond the field, and her thoughts turned back to the little pile of paper-covered thrillers she had examined. What kind of trouble had Dad encountered? Had he, by chance, attempted to live a scene from one of their lurid pages? The thought brought a wry smile to her lips. No, you couldn't believe in their reality after laying them down any more than

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you could go on living a nightmare after waking! Forgetting her resolve to approach Little Walnut Road cautiously, she began to walk faster.

Sunset shadows were barring the road when she reached it. She stopped, looked around cautiously, whistling softly the familiar lark-call summons used between her and her father.

Almost instantly he stepped out from a clump of wild plum bushes and beckoned to her. She ran to him swiftly, was seized by a trembling hand and drawn into the shelter of the bushes. She flung her arms around his neck and reached to kiss him; and as her eyes came close to his face she saw that under the red mustache pale lips were trying for coherent utterance. In the grayish blue eyes was a glancing specter of terror.

"Dad!" she cried, trembled for some moments in his embrace, then said rapidly: "I thought maybe I'd find you here. Tom came out from Big Grove and said there were two men from Texas in town looking and asking—they were looking for you, Dad!"

"Yes, I know." Forest managed to force speech from his lips, short, hurried sentences: "From Fort Tyler. They followed me. I knowed they'd come." She felt his fingers closing and unclosing on the hand he held. "I was goin' to lay here till after dark. I was headin' for Billy's. I got to go on the scout, Nancy! Billy's got to help me. He's got to lend me some money, if I ever get there."

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"Dad, what's the matter?" Nan raised both hands to his shoulders, forcing him to look at her. His answer came brokenly:

"I had trouble with a fellow at Fort Tyler. He started to draw down on me. I got to my gun first. Shot him. Had to. They found him. Said he didn't have a gun. It was a lie, Nancy! I saw his gun. They came to arrest me, but I got away. Rode a freight train all the way up. . . ." He seemed to have exhausted all the words he knew, and stood glancing from side to side. Nan waited, her hands clasped tightly about his thin arm in a passion of pitying love. Suddenly, incongruously, it seemed to Nan, he broke out:

"God, I'm hungry!" The words tore at her heart and she put her head on his shoulder and sobbed:

"Oh, Daddy boy; my poor Daddy!"

He stroked her hair, and when she straightened to blink away the tears, spoke again in a whisper:

"Maybe I better not try to get to Billy's. Maybe them fellows'll be watchin'. You better bring Billy here to-night. Don't tell Sue. Make out like you an' him's goin' to our place. After supper; an', Nancy, don't forget. You bring me somethin' to eat. . . . Sh-h-h—!"

A sound of something moving in the brush struck him dumb; he crouched, his eyes shifting from side to side, motionless, a fear-stricken creature. Nan's heart contracted in an agony of pity for him. She

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watched his left hand go to the grimy stubble of beard in a nervous, stroking gesture as his right pushed back the skirt of his wrinkled blue coat to reveal, in the sagging hip pocket of his broad-checked trousers, the wooden handle of a six-shooter. She was shocked at his shrunken slenderness, his bony freckled wrists, thin neck and flat cheeks. His clothes seemed to hang grotesquely about his frame; they were mud-smeared and cinder-stained. His boots, into the tops of which trouser bottoms were stuffed, showed mud-chinked seams from heels to tops. Listening, Nan could reassure him:

"It was only a cow you heard, Dad." Presently the plodding beast that had stirred the bushes appeared on the road.

"Yes, I see." Forest's hands came together. He rubbed the palms vigorously, and grinned in momentary relief from overstrained nerves. Then as if in answer to an unspoken question:

"I didn't get them steers. It was him that was to sell 'em to me. All clean two-year-olds an' I was to pay sixteen dollars. Then he tried to run in a lot of runts on me. I was payin' the top price, an' I wouldn't stand for it. He started in to bluff me out an' I called him! I wouldn't take it—would you, Nancy?"

"No, Dad, I wouldn't," she assented promptly. Deepening gloom in the plum thicket reminded Nan of the need for action.

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"I'd better go now, Dad. Will it be safe for you to wait here?"

"Yes, I expect so. Don't let on to Sue you've seen me!"

"All right, Dad. . . . Oh, my Daddy!" With a passionate movement of affection she hugged him, pressing her cheek tight against his. As she turned away, blinking fiercely in the effort to clear her eyes of tears, she said:

"I raked up eighteen tons of hay to-day, Dad; and it's nearly all stacked already!"

Before she passed out of sight, she looked back, saw him slump to a sitting position against a plum tree, lift his hat and draw a sleeve across his forehead.

"Poor Dad!" she sobbed, and began to run.

Running into the dusty red of the afterglow, she felt fear, excruciating, unnerving, threatening to bring her down in a sobbing heap. She braced herself with the thought of the bullying Texan who had provoked the quarrel, compelling her Dad to shoot in self-defense. She had a moment of furious anger against the unknown; and then a sentence spoken by her father recurred to torment her; "they said he didn't have a gun when they found him"!

Perhaps he only imagined the other man's gun? Oh, no, that was not so! He said he had seen it, and he had. Nan could rest on his word. But her mind would dart back and forth amongst the doubts and fears that she could not banish. He was excitable,

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easily roused to anger, boastful of his skill with a pistol. Perhaps he had fired too soon. . . . But he hadn't! He hadn't! He hadn't! She could believe him against all of the probabilities, against all of the evidence in the world.

She came to the barn, dragged Bess forth, mounted and sent the mare at a lumbering gallop across to the Dines place. Uncle Billy was turning away from the tired, munching hay teams as she arrived.

"What makes you so late, Nancy?" He took Bess's bridle.

"Uncle Billy, it's Dad! Come in here, quick." The old man followed, turned Bess into her stall, and standing at the mare's heels in the gloom of the stable heard Nan's story. It ended with the passionate challenge:

"We mustn't let them take him back to Texas and put him in jail for a lie!"

Billy Dines's hand rested warmly on her shoulder, though his averted face was a plump, pale-gray mask, concealing by its blankness the hot resentment against his brother-in-law that he felt and, worse, the doubt as to his story of the other man's pistol.

"Well, Nancy," he advised quietly, "don't tell your Aunt Susan anything yet, not till I see what ought to be done. After supper, I'll ride over."

"Uncle Billy, I'm going with you."

"Better not."

"Why?"

"Men's business, Nancy!"

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"But I must go; Dad said for me to fetch you. I must take him something to eat." Billy Dines's hand stroked her shoulder comfortingly.

"Yes? . . . Well, come in to supper an' see if you can get a snack together without your Aunt Susan knowin' it."

"Aunty," Nan proposed after supper, over which the poor child choked anxiously, "if you'll help Uncle Billy milk, I'll clear up and wash the dishes." She was making a swift inventory of the littered table as she spoke, deciding upon what she could wrap into a package for her father. As the old woman hesitated, she urged: "Go on and get cooled off in the open air!" She half shoved her aunt through the doorway, then hurried to get a copy of the Big Grove *Eagle*. She folded into it a generous share of biscuits, bacon, potatoes and onions, covered the tied bundle with her sunbonnet and raced to finish the kitchen work before milking was finished.

On the way to the barnlot, Nan met her aunt carrying the filled pails.

"I'll tend to the milk, Nancy," she called. "Your Uncle Billy wants you to ride over to your pa's place with him."

They departed under brilliant summer starlight. Out of hearing of the hired men, smoking on the front porch, Billy Dines asked:

"Did you bring some grub?"

"Yes; it's in my bonnet." She touched the package

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tied to the horn of the battered saddle she rode. For five minutes the only sounds they heard were made by the plodding feet of the two horses, the chirring of crickets in the grass, the soft stir of a prairie owl, rising from its feast on a field mouse. When Billy Dines spoke, it was evident that he wanted to divert Nan's thoughts from her worst trouble:

"I don't know what to do about that hay; looks like we wouldn't need it now."

"Couldn't we bale and sell it?" Nan suggested. "If we could, I'd like to have the money to help Dad."

Billy Dines grunted sympathetically, and after a minute observed impersonally:

"There ain't been much demand for baled hay so far, though I expect it'll sell for a good price one of these days."

"How about the cattlemen?" Nan asked. "Won't they need hay to winter the stuff they hold over and the steers they bring up this fall?"

"Maybe so, Nancy. But we're a long ways from them ranches out west of the Verdigris; an' the Indians are talkin' about enforcin' quarantine against Texas cattle that are shipped in durin' the summer an' fall. They ain't decided yet, though they ought to do it, the way them Texas steers give our native stuff the fever. . . .

"Still, I expect we might as well go ahead cuttin' an' stackin' for a while longer." His next question startled Nan:

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"Did your pa look scared?"

"Oh, I don't know," Nan evaded. "He was tired and hungry, and he doesn't want to get caught. . . . Uncle Billy, you *will* help Dad?" Nan rode close to lay her hand appealingly on his arm.

"Don't worry about that, Nancy!" Presently he swore, softly, bitterly:

"Damn guns! I wish they'd never been invented. Men ought to settle rows with their fists."

As they passed the Forest place, a man, unseen by them, rose from a prone position beside the house, from which he had commanded the horizon line, and hurried away to mount the horse he had previously staked in a concealing draw. He followed along well behind them.

Nan led the way across Little Walnut Road and into the bordering plum bushes. They stopped, and she called softly:

"Dad!"

Chester Forest answered, slipping out of cover to stand between the horses.

"Well, Billy," he greeted his brother-in-law nervously. "I see you got here."

Nan untied the package of food from her saddle, and thrust it into her father's hands as she stooped to kiss him. His cheeks were cold, and so were the fingers he closed over her hand.

"You want to get out of here, Ches," Billy Dines said, decisively. "If you've made up your mind to go

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on the scout, don't wait for nothin'! Travel by night an' lay up daytimes; get clear away from here soon's you can. I've only got three dollars with me, but I'll meet you somewheres to-morrow night an' give you what you need. When you get where you think you're safe, write to us." The old man waited a moment before adding:

"It'll hurt Susan, Ches! . . . Was there anything else? That you didn't tell Nancy?"

"No. Where'd I better head for, Billy? North? I don't know the roads west."

"Just the same," Dines advised, "you go west. Follow this road past Henry Bear's cabin, then cross over on the footlog an' keep up that little branch that runs into the creek just above the footlog. About a mile up, you'll come to a grove of blackjacks. Stay there, an' I'll—"

"What's that!" Forest exploded hysterically, his fingers tightening as they gripped Nan's hand. Back of them, the stillness of the night had been broken by a sound that might have been made by an iron quirt handle, or a pistol barrel, struck sharply on a steel stirrup. It was answered from a point a hundred yards or more in front by a sound like the rap of a palm on saddle leather.

"It's them. I got to run!" Forest chattered, crouched and sprang backwards amongst the plum bushes.

"No use, Ches!" Billy Dines dismounted, to follow the frightened man.

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There was a rush of a fast-urged horse from behind and the imperative voice of its rider called:

"Stay where you are, *you!*"

Billy Dines stopped. Turning to Nan, the officer barked:

"Get away from here, girl, quick!"

"I won't!" Nan cried. "I won't leave Dad!" She heard another rider galloping forward through the underbrush as the first seized her reins, turned Bess's Dolly toward the road and struck the young mare savagely across the rump with his quirt.

"Go back, Nancy!" Uncle Billy ordered. Miserably, with tears blinding her, and clinging to the horn of the saddle as the mare ran, Nan obeyed. To her straining ears came faintly sounds of rustling bushes; there was a shot, then another. Vainly, Nan attempted to rein Bess's Dolly to a walk; thought of falling from her back in order to return; then resigned herself to the sense of helpless desolation that flooded her breast and set her heart thumping.

At the barnlot gate, Nan dropped from the saddle and stumbled towards the kitchen door, calling:

"Aunty! Aunty!" The old woman dropped her sewing, ran to the door and gathered Nan into her arms.

"Nancy lamb, what's the matter!"

"Oh, Aunty, they've killed Dad! Uncle Billy made me come away; but I heard two shots."

"What do you mean, child? Where's your uncle?" Susan Dines's eyes flashed as she dragged the sobbing

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girl out to the doorstep and shrilled across to the bunk house:

"Sam Davis! Get up this instant an' come here!" She drew Nan back into the lamplight, to question sternly:

"What's happened, Nancy? What about Ches an' your uncle? Who shot Ches?"

Under the compulsion of her aunt's eyes, Nan answered, chokingly. She shivered in the old woman's arms, crowded close against the warm breast. Blinking and stumbling, Sam Davis stepped into the lamplight. Susan Dines turned to him:

"Set down, Sam; let me think."

Holding Nan tight, she stared over her head for a minute and decided:

"Your Uncle Billy's all right, Nancy, an' he's lookin' after Ches. There ain't anything we can do, honey lamb, so you come along with me. I'll go up an' put you to bed an' stay with you. . . . Sam Davis, you go out an' put up Nancy's horse, then come back an' set here, in case I want you, till Mr. Dines gets home. . . . Come, Nancy lamb."

The two mounted to Nan's little room, into which a gentle breeze was wafting the sound of fiddling crickets, an unbroken slow rhythm that lasted all through the night.

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CHAPTER IV

"THE BLESSED ROUTINE OF TOIL"

RETURNING to the house after stabling Nan's horse, Sam Davis adjusted the lamp wick, pursued a fluttering moth, then, sitting down, he began repeating in a harsh whisper:

"I knowed Ches Forest was in trouble. I seed it in a vision. I knowed it! Didn't I tell that gal of his?"

Periodically, Sam was driven by his visions to lay down the prosaic tools of a farm hand, take up a battered Bible and go forth, commissioned by no church and preaching no conventional creed, to redeem the world from sin. With the spell upon him, he trudged black-waxy roads and wind-swept prairie, to croak fervent warnings and pray loudly at embarrassed farmers and ranch hands.

"The minions of hell," old Sam went on muttering, staring at the lamp, "has cooked up a mighty broth of trouble for that man. An' the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children"—he interrupted the quotation to nod his head in exultant self-confidence—"onless Sam Davis takes a hand an' intercedes for that gal at the throne of God."

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Turning over the problem and trying to decide upon the manner of his intercession, mumbling sentences from the Bible, the old man kept himself awake during the following hours.

Meanwhile, Nan lay with a hand between her aunt's cherishing palms, alert for the sound of hoofs. Lost in her own thoughts she yet listened to Susan Dines's fragmentary reminiscences, evoked from the dramatic past to comfort the young girl.

"I was about your age, Nancy, an' your grandpa was in the freightin' business out of Westport, as 'twas then (it's Kansas City now), clear across to Santa Fee. He'd be gone months at a time, apt to be set upon by bad Indians most of the way. Your grandma wasn't very well, either; an' your pa was a baby that I had to take care of mostly—well, as your grandma used to say, we just couldn't afford to worry about father. . . ."

Again:

"I used to ride out a ways with your grandpa sometimes. He'd have six yoke of oxen that he'd drive walkin' alongside. He'd have an ox-whip with a ten-foot handle an' a plaited leather snake at the end that was as long again, two inches thick where it joined the handle an' taperin' off to a two-foot lash. I'd see him step out an' swing that whip with two hands, then there'd be a sharp sound like a pistol shot, and maybe a mist of hair'd rise off the near leader's back an' he'd beller. . . .

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"They'd kill buffalo in what's central Kansas now. They'd jerk the meat from the humps an' hang it in strings alongside the wagons to dry some more as they traveled. . . .

"He'd talk to us about William Bent an' Jim Baker an' Saint Vrain an' Chaves and Jim Bridger until you'd think them old timers was near neighbors, 'stead of rangin' anywhere from a thousand to fifteen hundred miles away! . . .

"One day, right soon after my eighteenth birthday an' when your pa was only a little more than four years old, your Uncle Billy rode out to our house with the news that your grandpa'd been killed. Seems he'd quit the Santa Fee freighters an' struck out with a little party for Pike's Peak an' the new gold diggin's; an' the Cheyennes got 'em. . . . Your Uncle Billy brought your grandpa's watch that the troops took off a dead Indian; but of course, by that time, the watch wasn't any account. . . .

"After that, your grandma just sort of faded away. Then Ches an' me had to fight it out alone up there in Missouri, until your Uncle Billy decided to come an' settle down for a while. . . . We got married in fifty-six."

The old woman's eyes rested upon the girl's flushed face for a time; she leaned to kiss her forehead; then went on deliberately:

"So you see, Nancy, we've had our bumps, same's you'll have yours. It's life. Anyway, as your Uncle

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Billy's always sayin', it's Life in the Far West! I tell him he can laugh, but us women can't always see the joke in the shootin' an' hellin' around our menfolks do. . . . Some of 'em call it adventure!" She ceased, falling into a reverie of her own.

"Aunty," Nan broke a prolonged silence, "Uncle Billy said maybe we'd go ahead and put up that two hundred tons of hay just the same; maybe we could bale and sell it. If we could, we could use the money to help Dad. What do you think?"

Susan Dines's eyes snapped with a light of pride.

"Why, I think that's a mighty good idea! Then, too, there's your pa's corn crop. . . ."

A young rooster in the chicken house crowed creakingly; it was answered by a round-voiced veteran. Out on the prairie a coyote struck up a multi-voiced serenade, and the Dines dog, Bully, barked in frenzied defiance.

"Gracious, Aunty, it's midnight!" Nan cried.

"So 'tis. . . . Gets nice an' cool along about this time." The old woman tucked the counterpane about Nan's shoulders and shifted from her chair to sit on the edge of the bed. She pressed her hand against Nan's neck and cheek, to find that the burning fever was cooling.

"Think you could sleep now, Nancy?"

"No! . . . Will you mind if I stay awake till Uncle Billy gets home?"

They talked fitfully in half whispers, Susan Dines

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leading Nan's thoughts back to to-morrow's work: more hay to be raked and stacked; more grass to be cut and dried in the sun; more cooking for hungry men; more of the blessed routine that in a new land builds slowly and surely the character of a people, along with its wealth, and stirs the pride of achievement. Nan began to respond to her aunt's practical plans; she proposed eagerly:

"I'll tell you what, Aunty: I'll open up our house and cook dinner there, and the men won't have to come clear back here at noon. If we can put up fifteen tons a day, it'll only take us two weeks more to stack two hundred tons!"

"But what about rakin'? That's your job, Nancy."

"I know; but you see, I could hustle Bess from seven o'clock to ten, say, and then go to the house to get dinner ready. I could get out again at two o'clock. That way I could more than keep up with Uncle Billy's mowing machine."

"Yes." Susan Dines nodded, and presently added: "I might come over myself before ten o'clock to sort of get dinner started, an' help wash up the dishes after dinner. I expect that might be a good plan; we'll see what your Uncle Billy says."

Childless, with only the long memory of soft lips that had tugged briefly at her breast, Susan Dines's heart had enfolded Nan, after her mother's death. Full of pride in the girl's sound sense and warm in the whole-hearted affection she returned, Susan thought of

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Chester's daughter as the delayed fulfillment of hopes twice dashed. Baby Sue had gone to rest in fifty-nine, and none had come to replace her; then Chester had proved himself a failure. But Nan—

"Nancy's got spunk!" she reflected with an inner glow. "See how she's bearin' up now, an' strikin' out on new plans. . . . Ches, he hums 'Wait till the clouds roll by,' but Nancy gets out an' helps push 'em away! Brave, precious child!"

It was almost one o'clock when Billy Dines rode into the barnlot; he stabled his horse and entered the house. Sam Davis rose.

"Missis Dines is up with the gal," he said; then coming closer and lowering his voice: "You don't need to tell me; they've took Ches Forest, an' he'll go back to stand trial in Texas. I know!" Startled, Billy Dines glanced inquiringly at Davis.

"Uh-huh, Mr. Dines, I've seed what's in store for him; an', say, I been thinkin' of his gal. Looks to me like it's a case where I ort to make intercession for her at the throne of Our Heavenly Father!"

"All right, Sam," Billy Dines agreed quietly as he heard the sound of his wife's feet on the stairs. "I guess you can go to bed now."

To the imperative question in Susan's eyes, Dines answered:

"Ches wasn't hurt. There was a couple of shots fired by the officers to scare him, but I managed to get hold of Ches's gun before he could use it. I rode in

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to Big Grove with 'em, an' got Claude Kearns to look out for him."

"What did Kearns say; did he think he could get Ches clear?"

"Well, you know Kearns. First, he sort of whines an' says he can't take any such damfool case, ain't a chance in the world for Ches! Then he wants to know who in hell's goin' to pay for defendin' the fellow; an' before I can tell him I'll be responsible he hushes me, kind of r'ars up on his hind legs an' says he'll get Ches clear in spite of hell an' high water. Gets his fightin' blood stirred, I guess."

"That's good," Susan Dines approved. "Kearns is a good lawyer. . . . I expect you'd better go right upstairs an' tell Nancy what you done."

"Is she—how's she takin' it?"

"Like a fightin' Forest! You don't catch Nancy cryin' much over spilt milk. Still, you better be as cheerful as you can an' get her to talk about the hayin'. It'll help ease her mind now."

"Soon as she hears her pa ain't hurt an' Kearns is takin' his case she'll go to sleep," Billy Dines predicted; and she did.

In the morning Susan Dines, moving quietly about the kitchen and s-s-sh-ing the men at breakfast, allowed Nan to sleep as late as she would; and it was ten o'clock when the girl became aware of light in her eyes, the warm caress of a July day, the sound of a hen

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hysterically announcing the dropping of an egg, the smell of boiling beet greens and pork.

"Aunty, what time is it? I'm fearfully late?" Nan hurried into the kitchen, hugged the old woman and sat down to breakfast.

"Your Uncle Billy said you was to sleep all day if you wanted to. He harnessed Bess, an' said if you wasn't out by eleven he'd send 'Blondy' over for her an' have him do the rakin'."

Nan choked suddenly over a swallow of milk, pressed the back of her hand against her eyes as though to dam threatening tears.

"Aunty, do you think I could see Dad before he goes?"

"I'm afraid not, Nancy lamb," the old woman answered gently. "You see, them men came up from Texas with the papers for your pa, an' Kearns said he couldn't stop 'em. They took the mornin' train down. . . ." Her voice broke and she found herself on the other side of the table with Nan in her arms—"Oh, honey lamb, we mustn't take it too hard, must we?"

Nan's arms were straining about her aunt's neck, her face wet with the other's rare tears.

"Nancy, it's hard!" she sobbed. "Ches has always been 'Little Buddy' to me; I've always tried to look after him; an' now. . . .

"I didn't intend to give 'way, honey," she ended simply, and began to dry her eyes on her apron.

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They talked of the day's work until Nan went to the stable for Bess with Susan Dines's last words in her ears:

"Two weeks 'll see the job done if everybody holds out, but I'm afraid Sam Davis 'll begin to hear voices callin' him away before then to go forth an' save sinners. He's beginnin' to show symptoms." Aunt Susan's grin shone on a face red-splotched from crying. Nan wondered about Sam: did he possess some kind of second sight, or had he heard something from Texas that no one else knew? She had heard people who believed in him and his visions stand up for him.

With her aunt's competent assistance, Nan's plan for providing noon dinner for the haying crew at the Forest house was carried out. From her own garden patch Nan got potatoes, beets and string beans; she hunted eggs for beating into high-piled layer cakes and washed curly flakes of dried apples for pies. Her tasks absorbed her, the more completely because she felt that every hour of work in the haying meant a contribution toward the effort to save her father. Letters came from him, sometimes cheerful, sometimes despondent; but, confident of his innocence and comfortable enough in the care of a friendly jailer, the general effect of his letters was to give Nan courage.

The two weeks, prolonged by two days of rain, saw the job finished. One after another, wind-waved rectangles of grass went down, dried and were mounded into tall forty-foot-long ricks. Sam Davis unexpect-

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edly lasted through; only when the final stack was "topped off" did he set off on foot, replying vaguely to Billy Dines's friendly question:

"Can't tell where I'll go; the Lord will direct my steps!"

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CHAPTER V

AT BIG GROVE ACADEMY

TWO disappointing developments dampened Billy Dines's satisfaction in finishing the hay harvest.

Harvey Stokes, who operated the single baling outfit available in the Walnut Creeks neighborhood, could promise nothing until November.

"Like as not," he predicted gloomily, "I couldn't give you more than ten days, anyway; the boys won't work when it gets real cold."

Then the Indian tribal authorities clamped down quarantine restrictions. No more Texas cattle would be admitted until cold weather, when what was known as "splenetic fever" was no longer to be feared. December first to April first was the period fixed for importations; and as a matter of course cattlemen would delay their northbound shipments until the last possible moment in spring, when cattle could manage to live on the young grass in sheltered creek bottoms and on sunny hillsides. Who would care to buy stacked hay? His neighbors had all they needed.

However, he maintained a cheerful front. The haying crew scattered to their homes, leaving to him and

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Nan two weeks more of work retopping the ricks with long-stemmed marsh hay, inclosing them with fences of stout locust posts and wire, raking loose hay away from their sides and, on windless, dew-wet nights, burning it in twenty-foot-wide circles about the stacks to form fire guards.

The two made a workmanlike job, and the result was stimulating to the fancy. There they stood, twelve great round-backed monuments, looking, on the gently rolling stubble that was already showing a new wash of green, like a widely scattered herd of prehistoric beasts, each carefully penned against the time when its substance should melt away under heaving pitchforks, to be spread for hungry cattle. If only the cattle came!

But Nan harbored no doubt. Fine, clean hay like that must find a purchaser, be fed to hungry steers designed themselves to feed hungry people in cities beyond far horizons.

"I'll bet," Nan said to herself, falling into the formula of "The House That Jack Built," "a king somewhere in Europe will eat the meat that is cut from the steer that eats the hay that I raked!"

More improbable prophecies have been fulfilled.

The haying finished, Nan and Susan Dines dismantled the Forest house, and Billy Dines hauled its meager furnishings, the few farm tools, the chickens and the pig across to his own expanding and prospering leasehold. Nan helped to dig the remaining potatoes, to

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pull the onions; she carefully transplanted to the Dines neat frontyard two bush roses, secretly naming them "Dad's rose" and "my rose" and resolving in her heart to keep them flourishing as symbols of a future that should mean for her father and herself the beauty and fragrance of blossom time.

Early on the morning of October first Uncle Billy took Nan and her little brown-strapped trunk in his rattling South Bend wagon to Mrs. Hardwick in Big Grove. Nan was to stay with her while attending the new Academy.

"I'm mighty glad to have you, Nan!" the spry little woman in widow's black exclaimed, as she kissed her. "I've been nagging at Cousin Sue to let you make me a visit ever since June, when your father first—" she brought herself up suddenly. "Well, Mr. Dines, why don't you sit down?"

"Can't stay, Miz Hardwick. Got to get back home. But I thought I'd go round to the school first with Nancy an' say howdy to the teacher."

In the new, still-smelling-of-paint Academy office, the smooth-faced principal met them. At thirty-one, O'Shea had a pale, immature look; his hands were soft and white; and he had a habit of tossing his mane of reddish-brown hair as though it hampered his thinking.

"Ah, Mr. Dines; and this is Nancy Forest. Yes. Age, fifteen—and five months. Yes. What grade shall we enter Nancy in?" Billy Dines failed to per-

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ceive that O'Shea was talking to himself, and replied confidently:

"I expect she'll hold her own with youngsters of her age!"

"I am sure the little lady will do our school credit," the principal agreed smoothly, conveying in tone and look a gentle rebuke. Billy Dines rose, embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"Well, Nancy, I'll come in for you Friday evenin'; I expect we'll start shuckin' your pa's corn Saturday."

O'Shea made a tentative step towards the door, a careful smile on his face and the thought in his mind:

"How these farmers work their children! Shameful!"

But O'Shea, new to his job, might have spared his indignant pity. He had yet to learn how eagerly these shy, ambitious children of the long grass country threw their young strength into the practical business of making dreams come true.

Nan gave concentrated attention to O'Shea's questions and instructions, and plunged full stroke into what he called, vaguely, the sea of knowledge. Kearns had followed her father to Fort Tyler, had secured a postponement of his trial to December and reported that he was as comfortable and cheerful as possible under the circumstances. The lawyer was working towards two ends: to establish the truth of Forest's assertion that Dick Brothers had been armed when he

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was killed, and the further fact that Brothers had been a quarrelsome and tricky dealer. Nan knew that her father's case was in competent hands. Buoyed by her indomitable youth, she felt that everything would "come out right," and wrote often and optimistically to him.

Nan found Big Grove swelling in the bud. Its twelve hundred inhabitants were in a state of elation over the completion of another railroad through the town. Preston Wills, editor of the weekly *Eagle,* pointed out in proud black type that Big Grove was now an important railroad junction; that wooden store buildings would have to give way to brick blocks; that already St. Louis and Kansas City drummers were competing hotly for orders from the town's merchants; and that the new square three-story brick Academy testified to the alertness of Indians and whites alike in the matter of education.

Eager attention to classroom instruction, Latin following geometry, then physical geography, rhetoric, ancient history; afternoon sessions with Birdie Durant, the art teacher, Miss Whimple at the piano and O'Shea's elocution class; Friday "programs," when parents came to hear duets, watch a Delsarte drill and listen to "the future Congressman," T. Albertus Shipley, "orate"; an occasional evening of candy pulling, a straw ride on moonlit Hallowe'en, winning quickly the friendship of girls of her own age, attracting the shy attentions of more than one boy of her classes as well as

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the approval of T. Albertus, who was nearly seventeen —her days ran swiftly.

Saturdays at the Dines farm she helped to gather her father's corn, repair fences, drive Uncle Billy's milch cows to and from the stalk field. She shuddered, as she always had, at the inevitable horror of hog-killing. Sunday mornings she drove with her aunt to church at Big Grove, and in the afternoons harvested from the creek bottoms walnuts, hickory nuts, pecans and baskets of wild grapes for jelly. Evenings, before the wood fire in the Dines front room, she read books borrowed from Mrs. Hardwick's "sets" of Washington Irving, Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Scott. *A Tour of the Prairies* especially interested her. Mrs. Hardwick put it into her hands with the remark:

"My father met Washington Irving at Fort Gibson in 1832, just before Mr. Irving started for the buffalo country to get material for that book; father was on his way to join Sam Houston and fight for Texas."

Nan read it aloud, and its pictures of the prairie, still dimly recognizable, stirred Susan and Billy Dines profoundly. They had known men mentioned in the book, recalled stories concerning them.

Christmas vacation came, a period of comparative leisure, of real holiday. Nan helped in the house and with the chores, went quail shooting with Billy Dines, read *Ivanhoe* and *David Copperfield* in the evenings. She spent a night with Myrtle Dunkin, four miles north on Walnut Creek, popping corn and crack-

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ing hickory nuts until midnight, when Myrtle's brother Paul came in with his dogs from a coon hunt in the creek bottom.

Only the haunting longing for her father clouded her happiness.

She returned to school, soon to be recalled to the farm by news of an accident to Uncle Billy.

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CHAPTER VI

HAY IN THE STACK

BILLY DINES had been thrown from a wagon by a runaway team, had suffered a fearfully strained back, and lay helpless. In pained cheerfulness, he submitted to young Dr. Hardwick's thorough examination.

"I expect you learned to treat 'em rough up there in that St. Louis hospital, didn't you, Doc?" he asked, grinning wryly.

"No, just comes natural, Uncle Billy!" Presently he turned down his shirt sleeves and put on his coat. "From what Nan said, I thought I'd have to put you all together again; but there's nothing broken, and you'll be out in two or three months—if you don't begin to worry." The doctor, who had come back from his service as interne in a St. Louis hospital the day before to practice at his old home in Big Grove, left his first patient to Susan Dines.

Sitting by the bedside, after her aunt had rubbed an oily liniment into the reddened skin of Billy Dines's back, Nan heard his account of the accident:

"You recollect, Nancy, Harvey Stokes half promised us ten days of balin' in the fall, but he couldn't come then. I was just as well pleased because there wasn't

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any market for hay. But lately there's been some inquiries, an' I went to see if Stokes couldn't move a crew in on us. He got some men together an' was to come next Monday. I thought I'd go out an' take the top off of a stack so's he could get right to work. Alone like I was, I oughtn't to've hitched up them colts, but I wanted to get 'em hardened a bit before spring plowin' begins.

"They jumped at a wisp of hay blowin' under their feet, just as I stepped into the wagon, went off like a shot before I could get a grip on the lines, swerved an' upset the wagon, dumped me against one of them locust posts you an' me set, an' it sure didn't give way, Nancy!" He twisted his face on the pillow to grin at her, adding:

"I've sent word to Stokes not to come."

"But why, Uncle Billy? Can't we go ahead?"

"Don't think so. Too much for Susan to do in the house as 'tis, with me on my bed, without cookin' for a balin' crew."

"But I'll stay and help," Nan insisted warmly. "Aunty and I can manage all right, and you've got 'Blondy' to do the chores, look after the stock and start spring plowing."

"We wanted you to stay in school, Nancy." With Nan's assistance, he turned slowly and painfully to lie on his back and search the girl's face with serious eyes. "Susan an' me, we're mighty proud of you an' the way you're gettin' along at the Academy. Seems like it's

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what you need—book learnin' an' mixin' with girls and boys your own age."

"Oh, please, Uncle Billy! I can study here and keep up with my classes. It's to help Dad, too; and that's more important than school! Don't you think so?"

"Looks like it's goin' to be a longer fight for your pa than we thought at first," the old man observed slowly, "although Kearns says the court is fair to him down there—give him an adjournment from December to May so's he could sort of round up his evidence. He's got to find that missing gun."

"But waiting so long—Dad must get awfully blue." Nan tried to picture the effects of long prison restraint; and wondered anxiously if her father's slender stock of courage would hold out.

They talked on until Susan Dines came in, to subject the invalid to another careful rubbing. It was finally decided that Nan should stay, and late in the afternoon she rode Bess's Dolly up Walnut Creek to tell Harvey Stokes to move the baling crew in on Monday morning as at first arranged.

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CHAPTER VII

NAN COUNTS HER CHICKENS

WITH the sunrise on Monday, Nan was off to the first stack to be baled. While waiting for the crew, she knocked out the staples holding the wire to the posts, tried in vain to loosen the posts in the frost-hardened ground, then with the aid of two pitchforks climbed to the top of the stack. She loosened the layer of marsh grass and slid it down on the windward side, and in the clean, sweet hay beneath nested herself against the nipping wind.

Settled in her observation post, she began to count her unhatched chickens—not always a comforting exercise!

"These twelve stacks," she figured, her eyes ranging over the double row of weather-browned humps dotting an expanse of withered second growth, "ought to bale out about two hundred tons. We pay Harvey Stokes a dollar seventy-five a ton—three hundred and fifty dollars for the job. Say the actual cost of cutting, stacking and fencing—wages and wire—was a hundred dollars. Then we'll have to hire a lot of it hauled to Big Grove. How many loads in two hundred tons?"

Nan was ticking off on mittened fingers the elements of the problem:

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"A bale weighs a hundred pounds. Uncle Billy says he can haul fifty bales on his ' 'possum belly' rack. Two hundred tons will make four thousand bales. Fifty into four thousand goes eighty times. Eighty loads. We'll have to hire two teams, anyway. Five dollars a day for each one for twenty days, that's two hundred dollars.

"Now: three hundred and fifty, one hundred and two hundred make six hundred and fifty. Three dollars and twenty-five cents a ton!"

Nan whistled ruefully; it was a formidable total, and she had heard that the present market price of baled hay was only three dollars and fifty cents a ton! "Why, we'd only have twenty-five cents a ton profit! Fifty dollars for all our work!" Nan abandoned her calculations with a little wail of disappointment. How were they to pay Kearns for his trips to Texas, his efforts on behalf of her father? The five hundred bushels of corn from her father's field might bring thirty cents a bushel and so add another hundred and fifty dollars to the fund. Two hundred in all; it wouldn't do. Perhaps they would have to sell her father's team, then the lease of the little farm. When her father came back, he would face the world stripped, more discouraged than ever!

Her fit of pessimism was interrupted by the sight of a fast-driven wagon emerging from the woods bordering the creek. In it was Harvey Stokes, and Nan stood up to drag off the knitted "nubia" she wore and

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wave it. Soon an answering signal came, and the trotting team was headed for the stack. By the time Harvey and his brother Vergil had climbed down from the wagon, Nan's eyes were dry and her spirit braced.

"Well, here we are, Sis," Harvey greeted her heavily. "Me an' Vergil thought we'd push on ahead of the baler an' get ready to set up." He grinned, embarrassed, his mouth widening under a bleached blond mustache and showing strong white teeth.

Tossing a wisp of hay into the air to verify the direction of the wind, Harvey set to work rolling up wire and loosening and removing posts. Nan slid down the stack to help. He was a deliberate, competent worker, thick-chested, powerfully muscled. Heavy brows above bleak gray eyes and a slow reluctance of speech emphasized his overmaturity; at twenty-nine, he looked and acted thirty-five. His neighbors said of him that he was dependable and hard-working, but maybe too quiet, so different from Vergil, who loved to talk, loved to go to dances and mix with folks, but hated manual labor.

They were waiting when the rest of the crew, two men and a boy, arrived with the low-hung, jangling baler. As Harvey went forward to meet and guide the baler to the selected site, Vergil stamped restlessly up and down to warm his chilled feet before going draggingly to help "set" the baler in the lee of the stack. When it was in place and a team was hitched to the end of the long power sweep, Harvey climbed to the

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top of the stack, to roll down the first great forkful. Vergil tossed it, in smaller forkfuls, to Fred Gifford on the feeding platform, who stuffed it down the narrow throat of a hopper. Young Wes Madden cracked his whip to start the team on the circuit that forced the end of the huge plunger against the hay. The job was under way.

Nan left the men at work and returned to her uncle's, thoughtfully and carefully going over her problem. Once home she went in to present the results to him rather mournfully. He listened, bunching his beard with one hand, and when she ceased, remarked solemnly:

"You've forgot wear an' tear on the hayin' machinery!" Then he grinned. "Looks like we'll be owin' somebody time we was through, don't it, Nancy?"

"But, Uncle Billy, oughtn't we to stop baling?"

"Well, I don't like to do that; maybe hay'll be worth somethin' time we begin haulin' to Big Grove." He dropped the subject, remembering the news he had for her.

"Fritz Engel stopped in to see me a few minutes ago, on the way to town. He's goin' in to haul out some stuff for Tom Winger an' another fellow."

"So Tom's back, Uncle Billy!"

"Gettin' in to-day, Fritz says, him an' the other man, with a trainload of cattle that belongs to Gabe Horner. Seems Horner's made a deal to hold a big bunch of steers in old 'Sofkey' Horseford's name, an' Tom's in

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charge. They'll range west of Little Walnut. Tom an' this other fellow, 'Shorty' Stevens, aim to live at Engel's for a while. Fritz says they're bringin' up a carload of saddle horses."

"Then Tom did persuade Mr. Horner," Nan said. "I'm so glad. But—look here, Uncle Billy, they'll have to feed those cattle for five or six weeks; wonder if we couldn't sell our hay to Mr. Horner?" Her eyes were alight.

"Think them long horns would eat hay, Nancy?" Billy Dines grinned.

"I think they'll have to eat something. Why did Mr. Horner ship so early, I wonder?"

"Seems Tom wanted to make sure of that range west of Little Walnut Creek," the old man explained. "Well, we'll see."

Late that afternoon, Nan watched from the Dines's kitchen porch the faint, fast moving outline of the strung-out herd of longhorns that followed the Little Walnut Road and disappeared from sight near the Engel place.

And while Nan dreamed that night of Tom Winger coming to buy the hay with a pocketful of greenbacks, the steers were taking the first active steps towards making her dream come true. Turned loose at the edge of the blackjacks, they sampled the frost-killed tasteless grass and found it unpalatable. They lifted disappointed muzzles, shook their hammer heads and set off by groups in swift search of better provender.

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Some time during the night, a detachment of fifty or more arrived at the stack remnant where Harvey Stokes had left his baling outfit.

They liked the hay; and when they had filled their bellies they celebrated by tossing and trampling what remained into a filthy mess. Incidentally, they wrecked the baler and buried it under the trampled hay. When, early next morning, Harvey arrived with his crew, he found the long-legged dun beasts rolling the piled bales playfully in the mire with their powerful, pointed horns.

"Gee-miny Christmas!" Harvey exclaimed, viewing the wreckage. He jumped down from the wagon and ran towards the steers waving his arms and shouting. But, unused to the sight of a man on foot, the long-horns only stood and stared. As he came closer, they decided that he was unfriendly, and with lowered heads and threatening horns advanced to meet his attack. Vergil yelled:

"Get back, Harve, or they'll hook you!" Harvey took his advice; and from their perch on the wagon the men managed to drive the well-fed steers away. With forks, they then investigated the splintered feeding platform, the broken sweep, the twisted and jammed plunger.

"Ruint!" Harvey delivered his verdict disgustedly. "I'll make that dog-gone Texan pay for this!" He took his grievance back to Billy Dines while his crew rescued the remnants of the baler. As Harvey talked with Dines, Winger galloped up and dismounted.

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"Why, Mr. Dines!" he exclaimed.

"Hello, Tom!" the old man greeted, and held out a hand. Tom pulled off a leather glove and shook hands heartily.

"Laid up, I see. What's the matter?"

"Got dumped out of a wagon—just a strain," Dines explained briefly. "Did you ever meet Harvey Stokes?" He indicated the silent hayman.

"Don't think I ever did." Tom shook hands with Harvey.

"It was his baler your steers ruined," Dines explained. "Set down, Tom, an' we'll talk it over."

"Your boss'll sure as hell pay for that baler—an' for loss of time besides!" Harvey announced truculently. Winger turned to meet his angry gaze, and answered quietly:

"There won't be any trouble about that."

He drew a chair close to the bed, rested his hands on the old leather chaps he wore and leaned forward.

"Now, Mr. Dines, about that hay. I'm aimin' to ride in to Big Grove an' telegraph Gabe Horner to jump the first train an' come a-siftin' up here. 'Shorty' Stevens'll be along soon to punch them longhorns away from your stacks. Gabe'll be up in a couple of days an' make it right with you—an' Mr. Stokes." As he stood up to go, Winger asked:

"How's Miz Dines and Nan?"

"Fine; they're over at Ches's place this mornin'."

"We'll ride herd on them steers till Gabe comes an'

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makes some kind of arrangement for feedin'. I expect your hay's for sale, ain't it?"

"Sure is," Dines answered. "Come in again, Tom."

At sunrise on the following morning, Nan rode Bess's Dolly to the stacks to inspect their protecting fences. Evidently, Tom and "Shorty" Stevens had been unable to hold the longhorns throughout the night, for not only were they swarming over the stack remnant which they had trampled, but a crowding delegation of enterprising and venturesome beasts had broken down a section of wire about another stack and were pulling and hooking hay from its sides.

Nan was as ignorant as Harvey had been of the steers' fighting propensities and, finding that she could not put her mare over the sagging wire, tied Bess's Dolly to a post, wriggled under the fence and undertook to "shoo!" the longhorns away.

She was surprised by their curious stares as they turned from the stack to inspect the skirted intruder. But she was not frightened, and advanced waving her arms. When a steer plunged towards her with lowered horns, however, she sprang back in alarm. As she rolled under the fence, an upflung horn twanged the wire viciously. One of a group that was stringing across from the trampled stack-bottom trotted forward and cut Nan off from her horse. Others came forward, horns lowered. Nan retreated to the fence, but jumped away from the thrust of a horn from the in-

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side. She was between the ranks of threatening horns, and she felt a sudden shock of fear.

Heads held low, the steers moved toward her slowly. Her momentary confusion and numbing fear passed; she considered swiftly the alternatives: a sudden dash into the open afoot, where the long-legged beasts would have every advantage, or an attempt to reach her horse. She decided upon the latter, and darted forward, almost under the nose of a steer. Twisting its head to bring one of the long horns into position for a ripping upthrust, it lunged. Nan stumbled over a tuft of hay, fell and rolled quickly over on her back. The fall saved her for a moment, as the menacing horn swept upwards clear of her body. Before she could get to her feet, however, the steer's head descended again.

She was horribly frightened. Across her brain flashed a lightning-flash picture of herself mangled, mauled and trampled to death by these wild dun beasts. An involuntary, agonized cry broke from her lips:

"Mother!"

Then the instinct of self-preservation, a surge of fighting courage nerved her to desperate action. As the long horn descended, she seized it with both hands and drew herself close up against the brute's head. Blinded by her clinging body, it backed away, shaking its head and bellowing. Nan shifted the grip of one hand to its other horn, praying that a plunging hoof might not pin her legs to the ground and drag her down.

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The steer tried running forward, its burdened head held sideways, but Nan's hundred and ten pounds, her hampering body, proved a heavy handicap, and it fell to its knees. Its momentary halt gave her a chance to renew her grip, to fix her body more limpet-like across its long face. It struggled to its feet, surrounded by its bellowing and panicky mates, and began an awkward, quartering, buck-jumping advance. Nan's legs were being terribly bruised, her dress was being ripped, and the fearful strain on her arms was becoming all but unbearable; yet she hung on.

Riding at dawn to the blackjack-sheltered bed ground where, at midnight, he and "Shorty" had left the steers quietly resting, Tom found only frost-covered imprints of bodies. Towards the west led the tracks of some, and eastward led other tracks.

"Go after them babies, 'Shorty'," and Tom pointed west. "These others are headin' for Dines's hay; I'll round 'em in." He set off at a gallop.

As he rode, Tom swore viciously, cursed himself for not forcing Gabe Horner to take the question of feed for the steers seriously, cursed the worthless winter-killed grass and the elusive longhorns. Coming out of the timber and into view of the Dines stacks, he saw a clustering group of his runaways.

"So there you are," he muttered and touched the shaggy sides of his Nigger horse with the spurs. Presently, he observed angrily:

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"You've busted into another rick, too!" He urged the horse to a faster lope.

Then he saw a steer start away from the stack; he saw others join it and begin an insane sort of milling and prancing.

"What the—" He was near enough now to observe that a horse stood tied to the fence about the stack, and he put Nigger to a run. His fear that some one was in trouble was confirmed as he saw the burdened steer fall to its knees. He made out that something, some one, was clinging to the steer's head; and spurring madly he began to uncoil the rope from his saddle and shake out an ample loop.

He rode at the group of capering steers, sending out the shrill wild "y-i-i-i-i-p!" that always sent the devils flying. The group scattered, leaving the hampered one staggering and plunging about— Was that clinging thing impaled on its horn? Full speed, he rode for the buck-jumping brute, whirled his loop once and threw. Nigger stopped, his forefeet plowing the frozen turf, turned to face the steer lassoed by its hind feet and heaved against the stretched rope.

Nan, at the limit of her endurance, was thrown clear as the steer went down. Half stunned, blinded by the grass and dirt and hysterical with fear of the rushing, pounding noises about her, she forced her arms across her head and screamed as Tom jumped from his horse and ran towards her. But before she fainted, she heard his voice:

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"My God, it's Nan!"

He gathered her into his arms, approached the panting Nigger, lifted her astride his neck, mounted, threw off the rope and, holding her close, turned toward the Dines place.

Susan met him at the gate.

"Tom!" she cried. He gave the girl's unconscious form into her aunt's arms, stammered out what had happened, then:

"Poor little Nan!" he sobbed; and Susan Dines, choking back the tears that threatened to blind her, ordered sternly:

"Ride for Dr. Hardwick, Tom; I'll tend to her."

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CHAPTER VIII

LONGHORNS

ON his way out of Big Grove with Dr. Hardwick, Tom was hailed by the station agent:

"Telegram for you!"

Winger opened it and read:

"Arrange for feed till I arrive. Gabe Horner."

"Good. No answer, Bert." He galloped on to overtake the doctor.

In the Dines kitchen, Tom waited for the old woman to come downstairs with news of Nan. She entered smilingly.

"She's feelin' real well, Tom, considerin'. She's got bruises an' cuts, an' her arms are sure strained, but she says she'll be good for another wrastlin' match in a week. The doctor says ten days."

"Gee, that's good!" Tom exploded with a great burst of relief, a wide boyish grin appealing to Susan Dines's warm heart. "You know, Miz Dines, she was sure doin' some fine old bull-doggin' when I first spied her!" On his way in to talk with Billy Dines, he turned to add:

"Tell her I've heard from Gabe Horner; we're goin' to buy that hay, since them longhorns seem to like it

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so much!" He grinned again, but in his eyes the old woman read a hint of the strain he had endured.

"That'll help make her well." She came to lay a hand on his arm and say with affectionate gravity: "I guess you saved her life, Tom. Me an' Billy can't ever forget that!"

"Shucks," he muttered, embarrassed. "I'm thankful I got to her when I did. . . . Well, I'll go in an' have a chin with Mr. Dines and settle about that hay."

The men agreed to leave the matter of price to Gabe Horner, and then Tom suggested:

" 'Shorty' and me 'll ride herd on them longhorns to-night an' shove 'em over to the stacks first thing in the mornin'. Reckon we'd better just take down the fences an' let 'em at the hay?"

"I wouldn't do that," the old man objected, "it's wasteful. They'd tromp more into the mud than they'd eat. I understand Horner's shippin' a thousand more in a few days, an' you'll have to feed for over a month, anyway. I ain't sure you can get any more hay around here. I'd haul it out from the stacks an' scatter it on the ground."

" 'Shorty' an' me are all right a-horseback," Tom observed dubiously, "but I expect we'd make a sorry combination on a hay wagon."

"Maybe," Billy Dines offered, "we could get two of Harvey Stokes's baling crew, Fred Gifford and Wes Madden, to stay here, for a while, anyway, and haul out the hay with one of my teams." It was so arranged,

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and Tom rode on to carry the glad tidings to "Shorty" Stevens and help to round up the scattered steers.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned if you didn't do some business!" the puncher commented when he had heard Tom's account of the day's doings. After a time he inquired casually:

"Is that Forest gal a good looker, Tom?"

"What!" Winger turned in his saddle to gaze at "Shorty" with astonishment, with an instinctive resentment of the other's natural question. "Shucks, she's only a kid, 'Shorty'." But the question raised a doubt in his mind; wasn't this Nan who had helped to put up two hundred tons of hay, who had undertaken to find money for her father's defense, who had left school to help her aunt during Billy Dines's convalescence something more than a child? Presently he amended his first answer: "Well, she ain't sixteen yet. Yes, she's right pretty."

"Uh, huh," the puncher acknowledged. Then meaningly: "Say, Ruby Engel's got a case on you. She was askin' all kinds of questions about you at noon. I sure gave you a rep!"

"Well, I'll tell you, 'Shorty,' I ain't carin' a hell of a lot about what kind of a reputation I've got with her," Tom asserted positively. "I know somethin' about her, an' she ain't my style. That Ruby gal is too wise for me."

"That so?" grinned "Shorty," and declared cheer-

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fully: "They can't come too wise for me; I like 'em educated."

Certain racy memories stirred the puncher to laughter. Connoisseur of young women of the chance-met type, "Shorty" began to speculate as to Ruby Engel's education and promised himself diversion in finding out whether or not he could add to it.

Ruby could have told him, but didn't, of her most recent course at her aunt's boarding house, at Joplin, when she was supposed to be attending school: afternoons of truancy and buggy riding with a young dentist, midnight escapes from her room to go on parties with a gay foreman at a lead mine, a clandestine friendship with an enterprising whisky runner who operated in the Indian country. She had been fired from school and sent back to her parents—another experience that she spoke of only to selected friends.

From an indolent, fattish, apple-cheeked child, whose coloring had won her the nickname of "Ruby Red," she had developed early. Now, at seventeen, she was round of limb, plump of breast, with full lips and too much color in her cheeks. Abundant black hair that always seemed a bit untidy; large, moist black eyes veiled by long entangling lashes; and china-white, rice-grain teeth in a wide mouth further equipped her for the conquest of man. She had a petulant, spoiled-child manner, and "ruled the roost" against her obese, broken-spirited mother and her rather easy-going father.

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She had attempted to form a working alliance with Nan.

"We ought to go around together, Nan," she had proposed. "We'd be a great team; you're light an' I'm dark. You ain't so pretty, but you've got a style of your own an' the boys'd be crazy over us. Besides, it's a good thing for two girls to go around together, makes it safer."

Nan had caught nothing of Ruby's implications. Innocently, and quite frankly, she entered upon a friendship from which she had, however, withdrawn in October, before Ruby went to Joplin. The break had occurred at a Walnut Creek school "social," at which girl-and-boy games had been played. Ruby had sneered when they sang "Charley, he's a nice young man," professed herself bored (she had recently acquired the word from a sentimental romance) by "drop-the-handkerchief," and pronounced the boys "too green." Then Joe Tiger, a good-looking young Indian, had appeared, to whisper an invitation, which Ruby passed on to Nan:

"Want to come with Joe an' me for a buggy ride?"

And when Nan refused, Ruby had gone alone with the half-breed and come back chewing cinnamon bark and giggling. She had whispered to Nan:

"Gee, it was excitin'! Joe's been drinkin', an' he made me taste the stuff. Then he tried to get fresh, but I told him to bring me back *pronto*. . . . Say, Joe ain't so slow for an Indian!"

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Nan listened with uncomfortable surprise, and decided that the girl would not do for a real friend. She found excuses for not accepting further invitations from Ruby, who did not fail, though secretly as yet, to resent the slight.

The two cowboys had their work cut out for them, and both Ruby and Nan were forgotten in the hard afternoon of riding and the night-long circling of the herd. Next morning they trailed the hungry G. H. steers to the stackground.

Fred Gifford and Wes Madden had already scattered one big load of hay in a wide horseshoe near the edge of Walnut Creek timber when the herd arrived. The steers swarmed avidly over it, snatching huge mouthfuls as they pushed and horned one another, moving restlessly, creating a bedlam of sounds with rattling hoofs, clashing horns and excited bellowing.

By mid-afternoon, the five hundred steers were full fed and resting. They lay in satisfied groups, sheltered from the north wind by a curving fringe of trees, chewing their cuds, their enormous whitish horns tossing idly above recumbent dun bodies. Now and then one rose, stretched himself like a waking hearthside dog, curled his tail to express more completely his satisfaction and paced soberly to the feed ground to glean overtrampled fragments of hay.

After a yawning discussion between the cowboys, it was decided that Tom should return to Engel's, eat an early supper and make up lost sleep. "Shorty"

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would bed the steers down before returning, and Tom would come back at daybreak.

Ruby served Tom's supper, endeavoring to stir him from the semi-stupor of relaxation into which he had fallen.

"Henry Bear's goin' to give a dance pretty soon," Ruby babbled.

"That so?" Tom's voice was dull.

"Yes; an' I'm goin' to get ma to let me give one, too."

"Yeh?" The prospect failed to rouse him.

"I hear Nan Forest was all cut up by that steer; I hope it didn't spoil her looks."

"No, I don't reckon it did," he assured her, and yawned.

"When d'you expect them other two trainloads of cattle?"

"Next Tuesday." The words fell heavily.

"Any more boys comin' up with 'em?"

"No; me an' 'Shorty' 'll handle 'em." He yawned again.

"Well, I must say you ain't talkative!" Ruby flared. Tom finished his cut of soggy dried apple pie, rose lazily and nodded.

"You sure guessed it," he drawled, and went off to the Engel barn loft, where he and "Shorty" had established their sleeping quarters. To herself the discomfited Ruby muttered angrily:

"If he thinks he can get away with that—yawnin'

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in my face—he's got another think comin'!" The light of battle was in her eyes.

Near noon of the following day, Gabe Horner appeared at the feed ground. Pulling up the horse he had hired in Big Grove at the edge of the munching herd, he greeted Tom Winger with the question:

"Say, Tom, how long have I been in the cattle business?" He spoke with a deep-voiced drawl that was pure music. Winger grinned at his boss, a tall, close-knit, heavily mustached and grizzled veteran of the Texas Gulf country, and answered casually:

"Damfino, Gabe; ever since Heck was a pup, I reckon."

"Well, I'm sixty-four years old, an' I want to tell you I never did see a sight like that before." He jabbed a gloved hand toward the feeding steers. "Eatin' hay; damfyou wouldn't think they was a bunch of old milch cows!"

Horner met Billy Dines and they liked each other at once. He listened with interest to Billy's account of Nan's experience with the steer.

"By George," he commented, "you-all sure have your excitements, don't you! Now, Tom tells me we've got to have your hay, an' I ain't goin' to haggle over the price. You name it, an' I'll draw my check."

"Well, that's white of you, Mr. Horner!" Billy answered. "Nancy an' me's been figurin'— Tom, would you ask Sue to see if Nancy can come down?"

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Nan appeared, a strip of plaster across her forehead and a limp the only visible signs of her encounter. Diffidently, she undertook to explain her calculations, gaining courage from Horner's approving nods and his interjections:

"That's clear, Sis. That's fair an' square." And when she had finished: "Now, figurin' all them costs, what would you-all say was a fair price?"

"Well," Billy Dines pointed out, "I expect we'd ought to consider the market price, too." He twisted his head to look at Nan. "What did the *Eagle* say Kelly's payin'?" he asked, and Nan quoted it.

"I'll beat Kelly's price, anyway," Horner offered. "What would you say to five dollars a ton?"

"We ain't aimin' to rob you!" Dines protested. Nan suggested:

"Uncle Billy, couldn't we promise to feed it for that price?"

"Now you're talkin', Sis!" Horner approved. "Tom tells me he's been losin' sleep worryin' about how to get that hay delivered to them longhorns. The two men that's been doin' the work have got to quit in a day or so."

After dinner, the Texan rode away with Fred Gifford to find Harvey Stokes; and the settlement was so liberal that Harvey had the wrecked baler in a freight car and headed for the factory at Kansas City that night.

Five days later, with the repaired baler and a con-

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tract in hand for a month's work up near the Kansas line, Harvey came to claim Gifford and young Wes Madden.

"I'm sorry they're goin'," Billy Dines observed. "Why didn't you rustle me a couple of hay haulers to take their place, Harve?"

"Didn't think of it," Stokes answered briefly, and when he had departed, Billy Dines reflected:

"That's Harve's biggest fault, only thinks of number one. . . . How am I goin' to get that hay fed now?"

Like a scene from an old Christmas story, the door opened at this moment and Sam Davis entered. Confronting Dines's astonished gaze, that battered fairy godmother explained:

"I couldn't get here no sooner, Mr. Dines, although I've knowed you needed me for many days. Knowed it when I was 'way out in western Coloraydo. I seed you'd been hurt—"

"Did you see it in a dream, Sam?" Billy Dines inquired, smiling.

"Wasn't a dream, Mr. Dines!" Sam corrected. "I seed it in a vision that was vouchsafed me, late in the afternoon of January twenty-fifth."

"Twenty-fifth?" Dines searched his memory. "Yes, that was the day; but how you knowed it beats me! Anyway, I'm sure glad you've come. . . . Now, who can we get to help you feed that hay?" He explained the situation, while Nan, surprised and pleased, came

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in to greet old Sam. " 'Blondy's' busy plowin'—maybe Fritz Engel could come; for the time bein' it's only a half-day job."

Nan interrupted:

"Let me help, Uncle Billy. I can drive the team and help unload, too."

"If you're well enough to haul hay, Nancy, you're well enough to go back to school!" Dines objected.

"But it's just for a little while," she begged; "and I can keep up with my classes all right studying in the evening. Please, Uncle Billy; it will save money, and I want us to have as much as we can for Dad." Dines studied the girl's intent, persuasive eyes for a minute, then:

"Well, if your Aunt Susan—Sam, do you think she'd do?"

"Do!" Sam repeated positively. "Sure she will." And to himself he added: "The gal's worth ten of her Daddy."

Next morning, when Tom Winger saw Nan appear as Sam Davis's helper, he rode to the stack and protested:

"Nan, I can't let you do that! I ain't no hand with a fork, but I reckon I can make out." He tried to take her fork, but she resisted, laughing, and showed him where to find an extra one. At first, he tackled the pitching, finding the fork an awkwardly stubborn and hand-blistering instrument. Lifting his hat to wipe the sweat from his forehead, he complained to Nan:

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"Dogged if I can make out how you an' Sam manages to tuck the hay up so good on them slippery forks!"

"Stay with it, Tom," Nan advised, "and you'll soon learn."

"I sure will," he promised, and Sam Davis coached him so efficiently that on the third morning he could load without assistance, and he brought along his gentle Baldy horse for Nan to use in herding the more restless longhorns from the stacks; work which she enjoyed.

The second and third trainloads of cattle arrived; Tom and "Shorty" drove them to the feed ground; and hay hauling went on all day long. "Shorty," whose tour of duty began in the afternoon and lasted until the steers were bedded down for the night, also undertook to "educate his fork hand," but returned to the saddle after the first blister, protesting:

"This ain't fit work for a peeler like me!"

Towards the end of March, when the longhorns' appetite for hay became languid and Davis pronounced Tom a "first-class hay hand," Nan went back to her classes at the Academy. Saturdays and Sundays, however, she spent at the farm and at the feed ground.

The last of the hay was fed to a herd grown restless. A morning came when the call of the greening prairie was heard and heeded by the steers, and the feed ground was deserted. The long-legged brutes followed the promise of better grass in many divergent directions,

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while Tom and "Shorty" rode hard in far-ranging pursuit. Nan continued her school work and her week-end duties at the Dines place with a sense of something missing—something that had been satisfying and stimulating.

She watched the coming of this spring with the feeling that it was different from any she had known before. New vistas were opening for the long grass country, and for her. Often, as she lingered outside in the soft fragrance of the night until Aunt Susan called her to come to bed, she felt the sweet, vague stirrings of new dreams, formless as the spirit of the dim reaches of the burgeoning prairie.

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CHAPTER IX

TOM WINGER'S SOCIAL CRAVINGS

ALL through that early spring, more thousands of Texas cattle poured into the Indian country. At nearly every switch on the railroad, train-loads of longhorns were shunted to side-tracks, unloading ramps were set against car doors and their gaunted occupants crowded down and out and were headed towards their new ranges. By quarantine date, the herds were spreading far and wide in search of grass, mingling with, and leading astray overnight, steers of half a dozen adjoining ranges.

Horner and other Texas owners came up to consult their Indian partners and consider the plight of the owners of the small, native herds that had thus been swept into the huge restless mass and scattered far and wide. They decided that it was hopeless to attempt to keep each herd on its chosen range while the grass was young, and agreed to establish certain rough limits to be guarded by line riders. In May, when the grass would be prime, they proposed a general round-up and a redistribution of the cattle to fatten on their proper grazing grounds.

Relieved for the time of the arduous work of fol-

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lowing restive longhorns, Tom Winger and "Shorty" succumbed to social cravings. On the first morning of their new freedom, while they sat in their sun-warmed sleeping quarters in Engel's barn loft, overhauling their warbags, "Shorty" proposed:

"Tom, let's take in that foot social over at Walnut Creek schoolhouse to-night. 'Twon't be no hair-raisin' jamboree, the way Ruby figures it, but we'll meet the folks an' sort of get acquainted."

"Foot social?" Winger queried. "What's that?"

"It was a new one on me, too," the cowboy replied, "but you wait an' see." He gave his attention to inexpert manipulation of needle and thread on his best checked pants. Tom watched him for a minute, then asked:

"Why don't you get that Ruby gal to do your sewin'?"

"Shorty" held up the garment and pointed to a ripped seam in its rear. "Look where they've busted." Cowboy delicacy forbade further comment.

"To-day's Friday," mused "Shorty," squinting at the young foreman. "Wonder if you couldn't get Nan Forest to side you to that social?"

"Nan?" Tom considered the suggestion a moment. "Why, she's only a kid." But this time he said it without conviction.

"Ruby tells me she'll be sixteen next month," said "Shorty," "an' she's old for her age, too. I've seen plenty married younger than what she is. . . . Say,

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Tom, I understand her dad's the feller that shot Dick Brothers, down there near Tyler, last summer." There was no response from Winger. "I reckon he's still in jail, ain't he?"

"Don't Ruby Engel know?" Tom's question provoked an appreciative grin.

"Ruby sure is talkative, ain't she! . . . I understand Kearns has already been down to Tyler twice on the case?"

"Yeh. I reckon that's right. . . . Well, Shorty, if you'll lend me them pants when you get 'em mended—if they ain't too bow-legged for me to wear—maybe I'll ride over after supper an' see if Nan wants to go."

When Winger delivered his invitation, Nan laughed.

"You don't know what a foot social is, Tom? The idea!" Then doubtfully: "I'd like to go, though I ought to study this evening."

"I brought my Baldy horse for you to ride," Tom tempted.

"Wait," Nan smiled eagerly. "I'll go ask Aunt Susan."

As she ran to the kitchen for an earnest conference with the old woman, Tom remembered with a thrill "Shorty's" parting shot:

"She don't know it, but Nan's got a case on you, Tom."

Susan Dines smiled at Nan's eager face.

"You go, Nancy," she said, "an' have a good time!"

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and when Nan had run upstairs to change her dress, she went out to ask Tom inside and confide to him: "I ain't much in favor of young girls gaddin' around, but I know you'll take good care of Nancy."

The old woman stood in the kitchen doorway as they rode off, waving her hand to them. "The child ain't had much fun this year," she thought; "an' she sure deserves some."

At the door of Walnut Creek schoolhouse, they were met by Amanda Bird, who taught there, and Paul Dunkin. The young teacher took Nan in hand, while Paul barred Tom's entrance.

"How'll you measure, boot on or off?" he demanded Tom looked puzzled, and the boy explained:

"The fellow with the biggest foot gets in free; the rest pays a cent for every inch—see?" Tom submitted to measurement, then went inside to meet Nan, who held a slip of paper towards him.

"Here's what you owe for me," she cried gayly. "How much did you have to pay?" He told her, and she lamented: "Only a cent more than mine!"

Inspired by Nan's spontaneous and unselfconscious gayety, Tom entered with spirit into the charades, played "Going to Jerusalem," joined in singing "Nellie Gray," the old Abolitionist slave song, and was induced to render "Sam Bass." Nan was so obviously pleased with his response, so genuinely happy to be romping through the games with him that Ruby Engel, sparing

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occasional wide-eyed glances from the public exhibition of her control over "Shorty," rehearsed to herself the determination that had been forming in the iron hard core of her mind:

"No green kid like her can get away with what I want!"

Ruby wanted Winger "on her string," and was quite willing to drop "Shorty" the moment she hooked the young foreman. Tom was proving popular at the party; and, besides, he was getting sixty dollars a month as compared to "Shorty's" forty, and could afford to "give a girl a good time." He was one of the best dancers that ever came out of Texas—so "Shorty" had said—and Ruby began to wonder if she could not land him for the dance at Henry Bear's two-roomed log house down in the timber of Little Walnut Creek a week from Saturday.

"There'll be high old doin's," she pondered, "plenty for the boys to drink; me an' him could sure shine!" Perhaps she liked him, too—a little—but that didn't matter. No man she wanted to win could be allowed to ignore her charms as Winger had done.

To further her purpose, when the ten o'clock supper was spread, Ruby maneuvered "Shorty" to a bench facing Nan and Tom.

"Say, Nan," she began across steaming bowls of canned oysters, plates of crackers and assorted pies, "have you got your corn planted yet?"

Her glance traveled to Winger's face, rested there

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fleetingly; she'd make him see what "people really thought about girls that work in the fields." Nan answered in a matter of fact tone:

"We've rented the place to Sam Davis, to make a crop on shares."

"Say, 'Shorty'," Ruby turned her mocking gaze upon her partner, "Nan's sure some farmer. You ought to see her shuckin' corn."

It was to be inferred from the girl's tone that to be discovered husking corn in the field on a frosty October morning was the ultimate disgrace.

"She's sure some hay hand, too!" added "Shorty," who failed to catch the drift of Ruby's comment, and merely meant to be friendly. Ruby then shifted her attack:

"Done any more bull-doggin', Nan?" Nobody echoed her laugh, and Nan answered cheerfully:

"No—once was enough." Again Ruby's attack shifted:

"Say, Nan, I hear O'Shea thinks you ought to go on the stage!" Hayseed Nan Forest on the stage!—that ought to get a laugh, but it didn't.

"I expect you hear a lot, don't you, Ruby?" Nan retorted.

"Ain't you goin' to recite a piece for us after supper?" Ruby persisted.

"Not unless I'm asked," Nan replied pointedly, remembering an occasion when Ruby's offer to declaim "Curfew Shall Not Ring To-night!" was ignored by

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a brutal committee. Both were angry now and, her rich color deepening, Ruby stabbed brutally:

"When's your pa comin' home, Nan?" The loud question drew astonished stares and brought a flame into Nan's cheeks. With steady eyes upon her opponent, Nan answered clearly:

"When he gets out of jail, of course!"

Ruby collapsed with a half frightened "Oh!" as angry whispers began to break out around the long table.

Still blazing, Nan queried: "Any more questions, Ruby?" Then she was blinking to keep back the tears. Tom Winger rose.

"Say, I forgot to tie that horse of mine!" he exclaimed, and looking down at Nan; "if you've finished supper, Nan, won't you come along an' see if Baldy's all right?"

Outside, while Tom pretended to busy himself with the horses, then vaulted to the tie-rack and rolled a cigarette, Nan dried the tears from her eyes. She was laughing at Tom's story of "Shorty's" run-in with a pitching horse that morning when they returned to help clear the table. At the urging of Miss Bird, Nan recited "Crossing the Bar" and was applauded frantically. Later, as the home-going groups began to depart, she joined the teacher, Myrtle Dunkin, and the two Madden boys in singing "Good Night, Ladies" in a courageous young soprano.

On the return to the Dines place, Tom advised:

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"Don't you worry, Nan, about that crack of Ruby's about your Dad. Folks around here ain't makin' any snap judgment; they've got sense enough to wait an' see how the trial comes out."

"Did you know Dick Brothers, Tom?" Nan asked, "the—the man Dad shot?"

"Only to say 'howdy'! But Gabe Horner knowed him well, a good while ago, before they run him out of San Antone. He had a rep down there as a troublesome *hombre.*"

"Oh, Tom, do you think Mr. Horner would be witness, I mean, tell what he knew about Brothers at the trial?"

"You bet he would! Gabe's one of the squarest old-timers in Texas."

"I wonder what did become of Brothers's gun? Mr. Kearns has found out that he had one when he left home that day, but not a clew as to what became of it later."

"It's bound to turn up," Tom observed hopefully; "an' when it does your dad'll come clear."

Before taking Nan in to her aunt, who had sat up mending and darning until her return, Tom asked her to go with him to Henry Bear's dance two weeks away. She promised a reply before going off to school on Monday; and next day after discussion with Aunt Susan, wrote a note for "Blondy" to deliver as he passed the Engel place on his way home.

"Dear Mr. Winger," she wrote, formal in the realiza-

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tion that it was her first note to a young man, "I shall be very pleased to accept the pleasure of your company to the dance at Mr. Henry Bear's home on Saturday next, April sixteenth." Her P.S. was more spontaneous: "Aunty says I must be home by half-past eleven."

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CHAPTER X

WHAT RUBY WANTED

HAD Susan Dines known the sort of dance planned at Henry Bear's, the girl would not have gone; nor would Winger, had he known, have asked her to go. Tom had seen plenty of men drink at dances; he had "liquored up" himself often enough, but according to his Texas code men always behaved decently in the presence of ladies. Violent rowdyism was reserved for the streets of cow towns or a certain type of dance hall.

Nan and Tom arrived at the dance as Henry Bear's quarter-blood wife, Sadie, was hanging a lantern in the broad, roofed entry between the two spacious rooms of the cabin. Under its diffused light, they saw the fiddlers already in place: old Motey Tiger, Joe's full-blood father, his face furrowed deep with age wrinkles, wearing moccasins, overalls, a collarless and tobacco-stained white shirt and a baggy black coat; and "Arkansaw Dal" Youmans, a thin, bright-eyed, glancing spirit of song and jest, an ageless Peer Gynt of the frontiers.

Under the blackjacks at the edge of the clearing, inconspicuous amongst the saddle horses, farm wagons and buggy teams, Tom saw a light spring wagon, its

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team facing the road and its owner sitting hunched on the seat. He was Jack Hayes, bootlegger, and his supply of contraband whisky in half pints, pints and quarts was concealed under a pile of gunny sacks at his feet. He was all set to do business and, in case of necessity, to make a quick getaway. Tom greeted him briefly, tied his Nigger horse and Nan's and went to wait in the entry. Old man Tiger and Youmans were tuning their fiddles, while the high, penetrating voice of "Arkansaw Dal" was beseeching:

"All that's got numbers for the first dance, git yer partners an' git ready to step!"

Meanwhile Nan followed Sadie Bear to a near-by one-room log structure that was the family smoke house, now aired, scrubbed spotless and furnished with chairs, mirror and other improvised dressing-room requisites. As they entered, Sadie put a hand lightly on the girl's arm and in a soft, honey-sweet voice invited:

"Lay off your things here—you like it if I call you Nan?"

"Yes; and let me call you Sadie. . . . My, how good it smells in here!" Nan's eyes ranged upwards along the rafters, from which hung mahogany-brown hams and slabs of side meat, onions and popcorn ears tied in bunches by their tops, shriveled dull-red strips of squash and pumpkin, odorous sage and little bags of melon seeds. Henry Bear's wife beamed at the compliment, a faint surge of color rising under the silky

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brown of her oval young face, illuminating and vivifying it.

"I am glad you come to my place for your first dance, Nan," she said. "Ruby, she been here often before."

Ruby Engel was at the mirror, engaged in a hopeless effort to tidy the mass of heavy hair she had never learned to put up properly. Turning away, she decided to forgive herself for affronting Nan, and offered:

"Say, if you want to smell somethin' good, take a sniff of this!" She thrust a small, flat bottle under Nan's nose; it was whisky—the stinking, peppery stuff that Jack Hayes had brought in from Joplin.

"That's my brand of cologne," she laughed. "Want some on your handkerchief, Nan?"

Two sets, one in each room, were in full swing as Nan went with Sadie to sit on a bench beside the swept and vacant fireplace in the east room. Henry Bear, huge and mirthful, dominated the set of eight which Nan watched, flitting, swinging, laughing and stamping in time with the fiddles and "Arkansaw Dal" Youmans's own version of a high-pitched chant:

"Swing your partners; balance all!
(Don't you look behind you!)
First to the right an' then to the left,
(Log-chain hook'll bind you!)
Swing that gal, that pretty little gal,
The gal you left behind you!"

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From the west room came a shrill yelp of joy, "Hi-yip! Hot dog!" Nan noted that Tom Winger, who stood "holding up the door jamb" opposite, straightened suddenly and went across the entry to investigate. With a little movement of alarm, Sadie Bear put her hand over Nan's.

Tom found "Shorty," who was not dancing, lined up with three other men just inside the door of the west room, their bespoken partners sitting along the opposite wall, in deference to the established tradition that segregated the sexes.

"Who's the big noise in here?" Tom asked in an undertone. Laughing, "Shorty" jerked his thumb towards Joe Tiger, galloping heavily through the set, his wide Indian face shining with excitement and much drink.

"It's Joe; he's feelin' his oats," whispered "Shorty."

"Extract of rye!" Tom corrected. "Looks like somebody'd have to handle him." Grinning, "Shorty" urged Tom outside the door and produced a flat bottle from a hip pocket.

"Have one, Tom. 'Tain't so bad." Tom took the bottle, removed the cork, swept a palm across the top and tilted it.

"Well, here's how!" He swallowed, took the bottle quickly from his lips and sputtered: "Sufferin' cats! What is it, sheep dip?" They were joined presently by Joe Tiger and a little group of diligent drinkers who debouched from the two rooms as the sets ended;

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gurglings and harsh coughings betrayed their acquaintance with Jack Hayes.

"Time for us to step, Tom," and "Shorty" entered to stand in selfconscious awkwardness before Ruby Engel and utter the ceremonial:

"Miss Engel, may I have the pleasure of the next dance with you?"

"I will be pleased, Mr. Stevens."

In the east room, Nan rose to stand opposite Tom as Youmans sang out: "Git your partners fer the next dance!" She was a bit frightened by the new experience, but Tom's smile and his air of assurance braced her. The fiddler's penetrating voice took up the calling:

"Salute your partners!" Tom bowed gracefully and, smiling now, Nan returned the bow. "All join hands!" She and Tom were incorporated in an extended circle. "Cheat an' swing!" Tom skipped past her, with a flickering grin of encouragement, to join hands and vertical forearm with those of the experienced Tot Colbert, while Nan was swung away in the opposite direction by Clint Alberts, a thin man of forty with sandy side-burns. "Swing your partners round an' round! Grand right an' left!" and in a haunting sing-song: "*Chase* that rabbit an' *chase* that squirrel, *chase* that pretty gal around the world!" Youmans's foot was beating the rhythm, while his bow was skipping madly, capriciously, across the strings and old Motey Tiger, eyes half closed and perspiring from the

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combined effects of his strident bowing and adequate nips from various bottles, supplied the deeper volume of heel-tickling music.

"It's fun!" breathed Nan, as she stood quiet a moment beside Tom, her hand held in his cool, firm fingers. His blue eyes were sparkling; he was poised lightly, ready to move off with the effortless grace of a kitten.

On went the set, simple figures giving way to more complicated evolutions, through which Nan, who had danced at school, found herself moving easily. The hypnotic beat of the fiddle music was emphasized by the caller's recurring refrain: *"Chase* that rabbit an' *chase* that squirrel, *chase* that pretty gal around the world!"

Set succeeded set with only the briefest intervals, relays of dancers keeping the floors of both rooms occupied, while the fiddlers played earnestly and tirelessly, sustained by drinks from Jack Hayes's ample supply.

At the end of the sixth dance, Ruby Engel whispered to Nan:

"Come out to the smoke house with me, I want to ask you somethin'." Nan went reluctantly, aware of Ruby's loosening speech and the increasing disorder of her appearance. Fumbling at her hair before the mirror for a moment, Ruby turned to ask:

"Do I look all right, Nan? Won't do to get too soused; boys don't like it, hey?" Then as Nan made

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no reply: "Say, dummy, I asked you do I look all right!"

"There's the mirror." Nan turned to leave, but Ruby barred her way.

"Say, Nan," she spoke carefully, controlling her words with difficulty, "you an' me was friends till you got so dam' stuck up you thought you was too good for me. We ain't friends any more, an' "—she spat out the next words as she sprang uncertainly towards Nan—"I'm goin' to scratch your dam' eyes out, see!"

"Sit down and behave yourself!" Nan pushed her backwards into a chair before running out.

Ruby flung after her:

"You watch out for me, that's all! You've got somethin' I want, an' I'm goin' to have it. I'm goin' to have him," she corrected herself carefully.

During the seventh set, Joe Tiger developed an acute grievance, calling for immediate and positive action. Some one had taken his place on the floor, and he lurched into a set in which Tom, "Shorty," Henry Bear and Clint Alberts were dancing with Mrs. Alberts, Sadie, Tot Colbert and the revived Ruby, who was making obvious plays of hand pressures and lingering glances at Tom. Nan was resting through this dance. As she sat looking on, she saw that Tot Colbert, too, was paying particular attention to Tom; and she had a little thrill at the thought that her friend was making rivals of Ruby and Tot.

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"Gracious, I don't care!" she thought. "But they needn't be so brazen—" Then suddenly she shrank back against the wall in fright.

"Yi-i-i-p! Hot dog!" Joe's shrill, crescendo yelp disorganized the set, and he stood swaying, red-eyed and belligerent. "Who take my place, say? Son of a—"

Himself a bit unsteady, "Shorty" made a leap for the drunken half-breed, but Joe swayed aside, his right hand going to the holster hidden under his left armpit.

"Hot dog!" His yell was lost in the roar of a forty-five that he had tried to level at the lamp on the mantel over the fireplace. Tot, Sadie and Mrs. Alberts crowded screaming towards the door, while Ruby seized the opportunity to grab Winger's arm and plead, "Get me out of here, Tom!" But Tom had seen Nan crouch and throw up her arms at the roar of Joe's pistol. He flung Ruby aside, to fall into the arms of "Shorty" who was picking himself up from the floor, and sprang to seize Joe. Before Tom reached him, however, Henry Bear, from behind, gathered him into the clasp of mighty arms, striking the volcanic weapon upwards, then wrenching it from his grasp. Seeing this, Winger ran to Nan.

"Are you hurt?" he cried, taking both of her hands and raising her from the bench.

"No, only sc-scared!" Her teeth were clenched; her eyes shone. In her hair were fragments of plas-

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ter from the chinking between the logs, dislodged by Joe's first shot.

"Let's get out of here!" Tom led her quickly past the kicking, squirming, cursing tangle where Henry Bear was savagely and efficiently reducing the drink-crazed half-breed to insensibility by beating his head on the floor. As they came into the entry, where the dancers were crowding about the imperturbable fiddlers and peering towards the scene of battle, they heard Jack Hayes's spring wagon rattling along the road behind a galloping team, while his sister Kate stood vainly calling:

"Jack, wait for me!"

Tom brought the horses as Nan went to the dressing room for her riding skirt and hood. Sadie followed her, to lament softly:

"I'm sorry about that Joe; I wish you stay now, Nan."

"No, I must go, anyway. It's late, Sadie."

Winger helped Nan to mount, swung up on his Nigger horse. Ruby hurried out to lay a hand on his bridle rein and whisper:

"Say, Tom, come on back when you get rid of her."

Tom's only reply was a "Come along, Nan, if you're ready."

Riding away, Tom saw Henry Bear, assisted by old Motey Tiger and "Shorty," carrying the unconscious form of Joe to an improvised hospital cot made from

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an ancient wagon box filled with hay. There he would be left to recover or not as fate and Henry's ministrations determined. Before they were out of hearing, the fiddling had recommenced. They rode for a time in silence.

"Nan," he ventured at length, "I sure am sorry I took you to that dance, but I didn't think it'd be rough like it was."

"I know," Nan answered. "I was surprised, too, because Joe's really a quiet, good-hearted boy when he's sober. You know," she laughed, thrilling at the recollection, "that first bullet zipped right over my head!" And then she added: "All the same I had a good time, Tom, and I like Sadie Bear."

At the Dines gate, Nan dismounted, gave her hand and looked up earnestly into Winger's face.

"I want to ask you something, Tom. Are you going back to that dance?"

"No, I sure ain't," Tom replied, pressing her hand, "an' if I was you, Nan, I wouldn't have anything to do with that girl."

Nan returned his handclasp warmly. "You couldn't come in, Tom?"

"No, I got to be ridin'."

Leaning down quickly, Tom kissed her, a touch of firm lips on her cheek. Surprised, she cried impulsively:

"Why, Tom!"

He laughed joyously, flicked the Baldy horse with

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his quirt to set him on the way and trotted after, calling:

"Good night, Nan!"

"Good night," she called back softly.

Nan went inside, wide-eyed, smiling shyly to herself, to stir Susan Dines with her story of the dance. What had just happened at the gate she omitted, for she must save that for herself, at least for a time. She wanted to recapture in secret its romantic thrill.

Undressing, she caught a glimpse of her flushed, smiling face reflected in her little mirror; deliberately, she raised the lamp level with her eyes and stood for a moment to greet the new Nan who looked happily out at her. She instinctively appraised the sun-browned neck and arms, the wind-tanned face, the tumbled, shining hair, the slender, poised body.

"Oh, Tom!" she whispered, and covered the smiling lips with a warm palm.

By eleven o'clock, she was drowsing to the far-off and receding rhythm of the fiddle music and "Arkansaw Dal" Youmans's calling: "Swing that gal, that pretty little gal—" and "*Chase* that rabbit an' *chase* that squirrel—" Remembered fiddle music faded, but before the veil of sleep was drawn, Nan repeated happily:

"Oh, Tom!"

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CHAPTER XI

THE ROUND-UP

WINGER began haunting the Dines place on the days Nan was home from school; "gettin' underfoot, so's neither Nancy nor me can get anything done," as Susan Dines good-humoredly pointed out; or discovering topics to discuss laboriously with Billy while waiting for Nan to finish whatever she was doing and come for a ride.

"My, he's got it bad, Nancy!" Susan Dines told the girl, with an affectionate smile and hug. "He's a good boy, too, an' popular—I don't expect I have to tell you that. But you're still mighty young, goin' to school an' all. He's young, too, an' you both can afford to wait, an' I expect you both—well, you ain't made any plans, have you?"

Nan laughed happily.

"You know all of my plans, Aunty; and I won't make any others without asking you and Uncle Billy about them. Tom knows I want to go off to school at St. Louis, and—oh, we just have a good time together."

Nothing could be truer than Nan's last statement. The two ranged the prairie on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, stopping at the Dunkins' for supper, riding as far as Thunder Creek to take noon dinner with Jennie

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and Vergil Stokes—when Nan would take Jennie's two-year-old boy up on Tom's Baldy horse and give him a ride about the barn lot, his round brown face shining with pleasure. Returning in the mellow dusk, their horses paced soberly with sagging reins while Nan's hand rested in Tom's and she listened to his repertoire of expurgated cowboy songs. There were snatched kisses, little scuffles, happy laughter. Between them was established a true companionship which both understood would some day be permitted to ripen and deepen. For the time both asquiesced in Susan Dines's advice to avoid serious planning.

On the second Sunday in May, as they topped Coyote Ridge on the way back from Thunder Creek, Tom pointed across the southward rolling prairie, with its irregular lines of tree-fringed creeks, and announced:

"Before I see you again, Nan, I'll be ridin' all over that country down there."

"The round-up?"

"Yes; it's already started north from Fort Gibson and Broken Arrow. 'Shorty' an' me'll start out Tuesday an' throw in with it near Claremore. They've elected me to take charge of one of the outfits."

"Oh, I bet it'll be fun!" Nan cried.

"I bet it'll be hard work," Tom laughed. "I ain't never seen any fun roundin' up longhorns."

Waiting until the rough winter coats of the steers had been shed so that brands were clearly revealed,

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three big round-up outfits had started work at the southernmost boundary of the Indian ranges, to move slowly northward to the Kansas line.

One advanced over a twenty-five mile front west of the Verdigris River, its left flank raking the timbered breaks of the Arkansas River and swinging up across the sandstone hills along the edge of the Osage reservation. A second combed the hollows, timbered hills and small-creek refuges of the area between the Verdigris and Grand Rivers. The third worked east of the Grand, up through the broken, picturesque post oak, pine woods, flinty hills and island prairie country where Indian riders on rat-tailed ponies lent invaluable aid and negro freedman children ran into the brush to hide from the wide-hatted, leather-chapped and hard riding Texas cowboys. Up Mud Creek came the hurrying riders and the harried strays and over to the Illinois River; past Gideon and across Spring Creek; on to Saline, the Spavinaw and Beatty's Prairie.

Steadily the round-up pushed north with its hundred regular cowboys, its big remudas of remounts, its rattling commissariat—cook wagons and hoodlum wagons —supplemented by two hundred or more local riders whose personnel changed from day to day as the seventy-mile-wide screen overpassed the local ranges.

Halfway up to the Kansas line, after ten days of fierce sleep-denying and horse-wearying effort, fresh round-up captains, with fresh outfits of men and

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horses, took over the job. Tom Winger and "Shorty," with "Cherokee Bill" Ridge, a quiet, competent young half-breed whose employment Gabe Horner authorized in a telegram to Tom, went down to meet number two outfit and work with it for two days before the change. From the southern captain Tom received the list of brands and range boundaries comprised in the whole six thousand square miles of territory the round-up would cover; and when he took charge, his was the responsibility for making the final cuts of the gathered herds, for making certain that local herds were left on their proper grazing grounds and for distributing all others to their ranges.

It was a sweeping, spectacular gesture by the cattlemen, emphatic advertisement of the new era that had come upon a verdant, dreaming land of easy-living full-bloods, mixed-bloods and contented "squawmen." In arranging it, Indians and white cattlemen had come together in amity; and in carrying it out, Indian, mixed-blood and white Texas cowboys rode together. Esau had spoken with Jacob, not to barter his birthright but to share it on equable terms.

Notice came to Billy Dines and his neighbors that on the Saturday following Tom's last talk with Nan his outfit would work the lower Walnut Creek and Little Walnut Creek territory. "Local owners please coöperate by driving all strays from their herds over on the Horner range near Engel's place as early as

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possible on Saturday morning." Paul Dunkin, whose father had received the notice, rode to the Dines place Friday evening to suggest:

"Pa says that as you can't get out, Mr. Dines, him an' me can drive by in the mornin' an' cut the strays from your bunch an' take 'em over to Engel's with ours." Nan, just back from Big Grove, proposed eagerly:

"Uncle Billy, let me help Mr. Dunkin and Paul!"

"Well, Paul," the old man agreed, "if you an' your pa thinks she can help, you might let her go along."

On Bess's Dolly, Nan was out next morning at daybreak driving the small Dines herd, with the dozen strays that had been adopted into it, to the barn lot. Susan Dines helped her pen them; and when Will and Paul Dunkin arrived with fifteen strays cut from their little home bunch, Nan helped them cut out the stranger beasts and send the lot galloping to the round-up ground.

On a broad expanse of prairie west of Engel's, they joined a considerable collection of strays and a motley array of scratch-mounted riders. Other cowboys for the day were loafing about Engel's barn lot, boasting of their skill as riders, bragging of the speed of their mounts and waiting with unconfessed eagerness to see real cowboys at work.

Henry Bear had inflicted his huge frame and an ancient, mildewing Texas saddle on an irritated, tail-switching sorrel pony; Clint Alberts rode a tall gray

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mule, barebacked, with a blindered work bridle; and Joe Tiger, still showing signs of his mauling at the dance, was sitting on the gate holding the reins of a round-bodied pinto on which he had strapped a rusty cavalry saddle. Wes Madden, proud possessor of a glorious, squeaky, fresh-leather-smelling sixty-dollar stamped-and-German-silver-trimmed Texas saddle, had taken voluntary charge of the stray herd.

"Hello, folks!" Wes galloped out to meet Nan and the Dunkins. "I'll help you trail these dogies into the cut." Wes believed that the way to learn to be a cowboy was to dress like one, acquire cowboy equipment and learn cowboy talk. He took a chance that the word "dogies" fitted.

Nan and Paul, the strays off their hands, rode over to join the group at the barn lot, when Ruby, who had been dividing her attention between a fly-pestered churn on the kitchen stoop and the animated scene outside, shouted:

"Hey, Paul, want a drink of buttermilk?" She pointedly ignored Nan, but Mrs. Engel, with hospitable intent, seeing the girl, waddled forth in unlaced shoes, her slovenly and soiled dress open to the curve of her great breasts. Ruby snapped at her mother:

"Ma, come here!" She spoke some words in an undertone, and her mother lumbered back into the kitchen. Meanwhile, Paul proposed quickly:

"Let's ride up on the ridge an' watch the round-up come in, Nan."

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Nan nodded and they gained the highest point of Coyote Ridge, dismounting to scan leisurely and intently the broken horizon line.

Far off towards the west, a sandy gully near the head of Little Walnut was sending out a low banner of yellow dust. From it emerged an arrow-head of moving specks—a trotting herd of longhorns. Presently three riders could be distinguished in the rear, weaving rapidly from side to side and harrying the laggards. Five miles away, towards the south, appeared another string of steers gathered from the White Oak hills, flowing smoothly down a long slope to the Pecan Creek crossing. Then the North Fork riders and their gather appeared on the crest of the ridge that fell away to the wide valley of upper Little Walnut.

By nine o'clock, the three herds had reached the round-up ground, standing wearily with heaving sides and lowered heads, or lying down. Half an hour later, the riders who had gone east beyond Walnut Creek were in sight.

Nan and Paul rode back to the round-up ground to find three thousand and more vaguely restless steers held in loose-herd formation. Now and then, an enterprising old longhorn at the edge of the herd would lift his head high, glance right and left, and trot away. The nearest cowboy would jab spurs into his horse's side and hurl it at a run to head the steer; there would be a thwack of quirt on leather chap as the horse came

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opposite, a low, snarling "ye-o-o-ow!" and the steer, wise to the ways of a relentless puncher, would trot back to rejoin the herd.

A quarter of a mile to the south, in a sun-drenched glade at the edge of Little Walnut timber, the cook and the driver of the hoodlum wagon, dressed like the cowboys in wide, once-white felt hats, blue flannel shirts, unbuttoned vests, sharp-heeled boots, with loosely-tied bandana handkerchiefs about their necks, were helping the horse wrangler to hold remounts in a rope corral, while "Shorty" and three other cowboys roped out their cutting horses.

Tom Winger came in with the last arrivals, motioned the idling riders to close the herd in, and trotted down to the creek for his own top horse. Passing Nan and Paul, he halted to smile through the streaked dust on his face and greet her:

"Well, hello, Nan; come to see the fun?"

"Yes." She returned his pleased look. "I'm here to help Mr. Dunkin and Paul drive our cattle back, too."

"That's the stuff! How's Uncle Billy?" Tom smiled again at Nan's cheerful report and rode on to the remuda.

Holding the great herd in a compact, seething mass while the cutting hands rode quietly in to force strays to the edge and send them flying to the proper cuts was the job for the seasoned cowboys. A few regulars and the miscellaneous array of local owners and

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riders held the cuts separated from one another and at convenient distances from the main herd.

"Shorty" led his three cutting hands into the milling mass of tossing horns, repeating Winger's instructions:

"Throw the cattle that goes back south over towards the creek; them that goes north up against that hill; local western stuff out there"—he pointed—"an' all Walnut Creek an' eastern cattle over by Engel's barn."

For two hours the cutting went on and, one by one, the main herd dwindled while the outlying cuts increased in size. The longhorns grew more and more restless. One tall five-year-old heard the call to depart and galloped madly out of the weaving mass and past Joe Tiger, who set off at a lope to head it back. Seeing this, a pursuing cowboy checked his horse and yelled.

"Surround him, Injun!" He watched Joe's frantic effort to overtake the steer, saw the brute's maddened sidewise lunge at the pinto and Joe's frightened gesture of defeat. Then the cowboy took up the chase, loosening his rope as his horse stretched out in the race after the flying longhorn. Three hundred yards of stern riding, and his wide loop settled over the bobbing horns; he flipped the slack of the rope over its back and the horse stopped short; the suddenly tightened rope tripped the steer, and its lank body was hurled flat on the grass. The cowboy crowded a fresh chew of tobacco into his mouth as he jumped from the saddle and ran to the prostrate beast. Seizing its horns to twist its nose skywards, he spat into its eyes, released

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its horns from the rope and walked slowly back to his horse. Rising, blinded temporarily by the tobacco juice, the steer stood still until the cowboy whacked it with his quirt and steered it, stumblingly, back to the herd.

"Gee, did you see that!" Wes Madden's eyes were popping in admiration as he spoke to Paul Dunkin.

Heavy scent of trampled grass; intent, catapulting riders; squeak-squeak of saddle leather at the strain; occasional sharp outbreak of yells; grunts and blowing of red-eyed, wide-nostriled and sweat-lathered horses; nose-stinging ammoniacal smells; loose-knotted handkerchiefs and unbuttoned vests streaming in the warm May wind; loud whacking of quirts on chaps; rattle and whirr of metal as overdriven horses champed bridle bits and spun bit-rollers over their tongues—until noon, the fast-paced work continued. At length, however, "Shorty" and his fellow cutters emerged with dirt-streaked and sweat-furrowed faces and reported to Winger that their work was finished. Tom, who had been riding about, vigilant in supervision of the work, spurred his horse into the reduced herd for his final inspection, caught a faint-branded J I C steer that had been overlooked as an H G beast, threw out two unbranded yearlings, to be identified and claimed by local owners, and came back to arrange for the temporary disposition of the various herds before leading the procession to the cook wagon.

Catching Winger's signal that the cutting was fin-

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ished, the cook lifted up his voice in a shrill invitation to "come an' git it!" and those cowboys who had not been told off to guard the herds raced for the creek and a hasty toilet before tackling "Greasy's" full kettles of boiled beef, skillets of fried beef, towering pagoda-like piles of Dutch oven bread, a great pot of boiled potatoes, a two-gallon jug of molasses, tin basins of stewed dried apples and steaming coffee pots.

Tom looked for Nan, found her with Paul Dunkin, and delivered an invitation through a mask of streaky dirt:

"Come on down an' eat, Nan; an' you, too, Paul. The boys'll be all washed up an' proud to show their curly locks to a lady." Nan and Paul followed him to the cook wagon, and secured tin plates, forks, and spoons while the boss went to the creek to wash the grime from his face.

Seated on the sun-warmed grass between Winger and Paul, Nan ate with keen enjoyment and watched with absorbed interest the twenty cowboys who squatted, knelt or sat cross-legged in a scattered silent group about her. Close by, their saddled horses grazed with trailing bridle reins, snorted contentedly, or stood with lowered muzzles, half-shut eyes and one sagging hip. Wood smoke drifted from the cook fire, with a sweet, idle wind across her face. Close to her hand nodded a cluster of wild foxgloves, and in the timber a bluejay made a loud, cheerful racket. So quietly did the tired men attack their rations, so com-

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pletely had fierce, clamorous action given way to relaxation and immobility, that Nan's ears could catch the soft underflow of sound from the insects of the grass. Back on the prairie, even the longhorns grazed quietly, in lazy content, under the noon sun's caress.

Nan was preparing, under Tom's amused direction, a dessert of molasses-soaked bread crumbs when Sam Davis rode up to the group and beckoned to her. As soon as she reached him he leaned down to whisper hoarsely:

"You're to go home right away, Nan; I'll help bring back the cattle. Kearns sent word he's off for Texas on the eight o'clock train, an' your uncle wants you to hurry back."

"Is it the trial, Sam?" Nan's heart began to pound; she clutched Sam's sleeve and stared up into his face.

"Dunno; didn't see Kearns's letter," Sam replied, then amended, in a hoarse whisper: "But I do know, Nan! I don't have to be told."

Nan called to Tom, who went to catch her horse and his own; and as he rode with her for a way she told him of the message and what it probably meant.

"I expect you're right, Nan; an' maybe Kearns wants you to go down to Fort Tyler with him." His voice was tender with sympathy. Then he stopped suddenly.

"Hold on a minute, I'll write out a telegram to Gabe Horner. If it is the trial, he ought to get up to Tyler to testify. You can send it from Big Grove." From his watch pocket Tom extracted a stub of pencil and

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from his vest pocket a soiled notebook. He tore a page from this and scribbled his message.

"Here, Nan. The old-timer'll sure show up, an' don't you worry over that trial!"

"I'll try not to, Tom." Nan's eyes showed her gratitude for the telegram and the comfort of his sympathy. "Well, I expect you'd better go back now." Tom glanced round at the distant group of cowboys, whose eyes had followed them, and lamented softly:

"Dog-gone it, Nan, I can't kiss you good-by before all the boys." He rode close, dropped his hand to crush Nan's warm, clinging fingers and muttered:

"Good luck, Nan—little sweetheart!" Happy tears were in her eyes as she watched him turn his horse and gallop away to the wagon.

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CHAPTER XII

JULIA ELLERY

FOREST'S trial for killing Dick Brothers had been set for Monday, and Kearns wrote that he wanted Nan to go to Texas. Fortunately, at Big Grove he had found Mrs. Julia Ellery, a friend of Mrs. Hardwick's, who lived at Fort Tyler and was traveling down on the same train. She would be glad to take Nan into her home there. Kearns also wrote:

"Don't tell her this, but I want the jury to see her beside her father. Sympathy is a strong argument, and we can't afford to overlook anything that may help."

Susan Dines drove Nan to Mrs. Hardwick's after Billy had thrust a tight-folded little packet of five-dollar bills into her hand, kissed her on both cheeks and stammered huskily:

"Tell your pa we're countin' on seein' him up here right away. Good luck, Nancy . . . good luck; an' try to keep a stiff upper lip—whatever happens!"

Giving the horses their heads, Susan settled into the seat and talked of Mrs. Ellery:

"I've heard cousin May Hardwick speak of her as havin' somethin' to do with some ladies' benevolent order called the Daughters of Ruth. May's right fond of her, admires her, too; says she lectures for that

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order. . . . I expect she's real kind-hearted, and you'll be comfortable with her. . . .

"We'll get to cousin May's in time for supper, an' I expect Miz Ellery'll be there, too, an' I'll have a chance to size her up. . . . The 'Flyer' don't pull out till eight, even if it's on time, which it hardly ever is, an' we'll get to cousin May's by six easy.

"I remember now—"

But Nan, lost in anxious thought, her hands gripped tight in her lap, only nodded.

The old woman slapped the lines perfunctorily on the backs of the ambling horses, rousing them to a brief burst of lazy trotting, and turned squarely upon her niece:

"It's goin' to be hard to face what's comin', my dear; the long trip, bein' with strangers an' the doin's in that courtroom. I know it'd scare me. But"—her voice became a low-pitched ripple of sound—"I've learned, from livin' a long time in a world that's full of troubles, that things ain't near so bad when you come face to face with 'em close up, as they 'peared to be. Nancy, Ches has been a worry to me a mighty sight longer than he has to you. My heart is just about breakin' for the poor boy! Yet I believe things'll come out all right."

"Oh, Aunty, do you?" Nan's eyes filled. "Seems to me now, for the first time, Dad's trouble is—oh, I don't know! Mighty bad for all of us." She lifted her aunt's free hand quickly to her breast. "Yes, I *am*

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scared—it's something in here that seems to get the shivers and sends a bitter taste to my mouth when I think of the awful thing that might happen to Dad."

She pressed Susan Dines's hand hard against her heart.

"Don't I know it, child!" The old woman spoke almost fiercely.

"Some nights," Nan went on, "I've waked up trembling, with my face wet from crying in my sleep and wanted to call you, Aunty, to come and talk to me."

"Why didn't you, honey lamb?" Susan Dines released her hand from Nan's clasp, to draw the girl's head to her shoulder and kiss the tear-wet face.

After a minute, Nan sat upright, felt for a handkerchief, wiped away her tears and managed a tremulous smile.

"I'm not going to be frightened any more, Aunty; I'm just going to think about what I can do to help Dad and you and Uncle Billy and Mr. Kearns. A girl past sixteen—"

Julia Ellery was already at Mrs. Hardwick's when Nan and her aunt arrived, a chatty, plumpish, blue-eyed blonde woman in the middle thirties. Under carefully darkened brows, her friendly eyes sparkled, and her smile revealed rows of even, white teeth. On her waved hair sat a new blue-straw toque, with iridescent black feathers draped across its crown.

Nan liked Mrs. Ellery at once, her cheerful manner,

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the sympathetic pressure of her hand, her impulsive kiss and greeting.

"I'm so glad you're going to be with me on this long trip," she said, and, retaining Nan's hand, turned to explain to Susan Dines: "Mr. Kearns couldn't get berths, so we'll have to make the best of a chair car."

Before taking her lonely way back to the farm, Nan's aunt had a minute alone with her.

"I'm real pleased with Miz Ellery," she said. "She'll be a comfort to you. . . . Some of us'll come into Big Grove every day, in case any word should come. Kearns says he'll telegraph when there's news, an' you write every day, Nancy, even if it's only a scratch of the pen. I wish I could stay to see you off on the train, but I've got to get back to your Uncle Billy."

She kissed the girl tenderly and Nan clung to her a moment.

"An' now—oh, honey lamb, tell Ches that Sue's heart is just achin' for her 'buddy'!"

With some words of thanks to Mrs. Ellery and a good-by to May Hardwick, she climbed to the wagon seat and drove away into the sunset's afterglow.

Nan and Mrs. Ellery sat together in a chair car of the "Flyer," Kearns finding a vacant chair just in front of them, where he began methodically to sort and read documents in blue covers, then fold them carefully and slip them under wide rubber bands. A soft felt hat pulled low over brooding eyes and twitching, beak-like nose, his short neck lost between hunched shoulders,

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he sat absorbed in his papers until the negro porter came through to lower the gas lights.

Tactfully, Mrs. Ellery settled to silence and Nan, tired after the long morning in the saddle and the excitement of the sudden journey, soon fell into fitful slumber. She was too young, too full of healthy energy, to brood long over her troubles. Only at times, roused by the noises when the train pulled into a station, she stirred, sighed, shivered forlornly under the oppression of strangeness and loneliness. "Dad, oh, my Daddy!" she whispered once, and Mrs. Ellery, warm-hearted and pitying, murmured "dear child" and drew the tired girl's head to her shoulder.

"I thought you were asleep," Nan said shyly, brushing a handkerchief across her eyes and returning the comforting pressure of soft white hands on her fingers.

"No, my dear," Julia Ellery answered. "But you've got a long day before you, and you must try to rest."

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CHAPTER XIII

FACING TROUBLE CLOSE UP

THE train got to Fort Tyler two hours late, at ten in the morning. Explaining that he must first arrange the meeting with her father, Kearns insisted that Nan should have a good breakfast; and Mrs. Ellery took her to Mrs. Honeywell's cool little Commercial Café on the south side of Court House Square.

"You two get tidied up and eat," the lawyer advised. "I'll be back in no time for Nan." He suggested to the excited girl: "You want to look nice and cheerful when you see your father, don't you?"

"Yes," Nan nodded. Her heart was pounding and her eyes misting, but, surprisingly, she found that she was wolfishly hungry. As they ate, Mrs. Ellery chatted with her and with Mrs. Honeywell, who hovered sympathetically about their table. Pale, and a little dark under the eyes Nan was, but she had not lost her courageous spirit, and Julia Ellery thought: "How pretty the child is! She'll grow up into a beauty." She wondered what the father was like.

Kearns brought Nan into the small white-washed room at the jail where Forest waited, then left them with a muttered apology.

"Dad, Dad," was all the girl could say at first, hug-

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ging him close and crying without restraint on his shoulder; and he, pressing her cheek to his, murmured old words of affection, patted her shoulder, stroked her hair. At last, putting her off to get a good look at her, he exulted:

"You *are* glad to see your Dad, Nancy!" Then: "But, say, you've growed a heap since I seen you!"

They settled down to talk, her father listening to Nan's messages, to all she had to tell of home affairs. He asked countless questions, responded to her solicitous queries with little comments on his life as a prisoner.

"I get awful tired of the sameness," he said, "but they treat me real well, an' the meals ain't bad. They've loaned me some books, too. . . ."

At noon, a deputy in high-heeled boots lounged in.

"Your friends is waitin', Miss Forest," he drawled softly.

"I guess you'll have to go, Nancy," Forest rose reluctantly and looked at the deputy, "but I'll see you again soon. Run on an' get your dinner, while I see what Mr. Brennon here's got for me."

Going with Mrs. Ellery to her "doll house," as she called her cottage, Nan felt comforted. After all, things might be worse!

Not all the talks between Nan and her father, however, were so cheerful. By turns, he was despairing, hopeful, boastful. The trial was set for Thursday, and on Wednesday Nan found him sunk in a mood of black

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depression. Remembering Tom's telegram to Horner, she asked her father if he had heard from the cattleman.

Instantly he brightened, confidence in his face, and said:

"Sure; didn't I tell you? He's willin' to testify, an' he had Brothers sized up right—says he was a cattle rustler an' tried to work up a rep as a bad man in the Gulf country. . . . Well, he tried to run a bluff over me, Nancy, but I called him!" A flush rose to his cheek, his red mustache lifted in a vindictive grin.

Presently, he drew out of his pocket a sheet of cheap ruled note paper and handed it to Nan.

"That old crank, Sam Davis, sent me this," he explained. "It got to me this mornin'. What's it mean?"

Nan took the sheet and read:

"Ches Forest sir I send you these few lines to let you know I am makin interseshun fer you account of that there gal of yourn. I never did think you amounted to anything. I reckon this man Kerns kin save you from the rope this time but you wont git off but you wait an dont git the blues. I will let you know when the time comes fer the Lords hand to be reached out to you. Corn looks good on your twenty an I am well an hope these few lines finds you the same."

"What does the blamed old fool mean?" Forest reiterated.

"I don't know, Dad," Nan answered. "There's

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something queer about Sam." She told of Davis's appearance following her uncle's injury, his reference to the vision that had come to him in Colorado. "I can't help thinking he's got some power to foresee. . . . You'd better let me give this letter to Mr. Kearns, and if Sam knows anything he'll find it out. Don't bother about what he says of you, Dad!"

Kearns read the scrawl, pocketed it and smiled at Nan.

"Nothing to do about it now," he commented. "How are *you* feeling, Nancy, cheerful and hopeful?"

"Oh, I know things will come out right; Mrs. Ellery does, too."

"That's the right spirit! We've got a fight on our hands. . . . How do you like Mrs. Ellery by now?"

"Why, I simply love her, she's so good to me and Dad."

"That's all right then. She's very fond of you, Nancy—she believes in your father, too."

But he did not tell the girl of several interviews between himself and the widow, nor of the plan arranged with her to help Chester Forest in the coming ordeal.

On the morning of the trial, Nan went to the courtroom with Julia Ellery. Kearns met them at the door and led the older woman to a seat outside the railing. Taking Nan inside, he placed her in a chair beside the one her father was to occupy.

Nan sat down, cheeks burning, overcome with shy-

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ness. But soon she recovered, and looked about the room with curiosity.

In front of her, inside the railing, stood a high, broad desk and a large swivel chair; of course, the judge would sit there. Beside her, and at right angles, was another small railed-in space, filled with chairs, the jury box. A tiny box, holding one chair, between the judge's desk and the jury inclosure must be for the witnesses as they came forward to be questioned in turn. Right under the jury box was the prosecutor's table, and he leaned over it, fumbling with impressive-looking papers, a slim, blond man with a pointed beard and carefully combed mop of hair. At the table before which Nan sat, Kearns was methodically arranging his papers.

Back of the railing at a long oak table sat the reporters for Fort Tyler's two weekly newspapers and the struggling new daily; and behind them, in the glare of light from high uncurtained windows, were fifty or sixty men who had been called as possible jurors and witnesses, sitting on long benches, some with arms flung expansively along the backs and hats cocked on crossed knees, some shifting ancient, incrusted spittoons to more advantageous positions, some hunched sullenly with folded arms, some intent upon the scene before them.

A voice broke sharply on Nan's ears:

"Order in the court!"

Everybody came up standing, Nan too. She turned

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her head to see a side door open and a briskly moving white-haired and white-bearded man appear and mount into the judge's seat. There was a rustle as every one sat down, and there followed a rapid interchange of phrases and sentences between the judge and counsel, the judge and the clerk, the clerk and the attendants. An expectant pause, then Nan saw her father come in with a jailer; as he took his seat between her and Kearns, the lawyer heartened him with a confident smile.

More hurried, formal words from judge and clerk, then from the jury wheel was drawn a slip of paper, a name was called and the first talesman to be examined moved forward hesitantly to the witness chair, to be questioned.

To Nan, this preliminary functioning of the machinery of the law seemed swift and terrifying. Gripping her father's hand, she forced herself to follow the procedure carefully, trying to comprehend its meaning; she began to lose her sense of confusion as the prosecutor, Husted, asked his slow and neatly-framed questions. . . . Husted sat down, and Kearns rose, hands in the side pockets of his coat, to plump sharp queries in a tone of acute annoyance. The talesman was challenged, sent down and another was called.

Distracting movements, quickly stilled by attendants, amongst the waiting talesmen; the nervous, swinging glances of the first juror chosen, as he sat in lonely state in the jury box (a middle-aged grocer with

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mutton-chop whiskers, wearing a diamond in his bow tie); fragmentary snatches of soft southern voices floating in through the open windows from Court House Square; the clatter of a horse car passing along South Street, on the other side of the square; Kearns's increasing aggressiveness, his prolonged scrutiny of the talesmen's faces as he flung explosive questions, his brief whispered conferences with her father, his barked "Challenged!" or his smiling "Satisfactory to the defense"—all began to fit into an orderly picture for Nan.

Kearns's battle for a satisfactory jury, his professional devices for impressing the talesmen were rousing her father's interest. Was it also appealing to that thirst for the dramatic which had led him to read ten-cent fiction? He seemed almost proud of the importance of his position as he watched and listened.

With ten jurors in the box, the mid-day adjournment released Nan from tension. She went with Julia Ellery to lunch at the Commercial Café, where Mrs. Honeywell came over to whisper confidentially with Mrs. Ellery; before leaving the restaurant, the two went upstairs together, and as they came down Nan heard Mrs. Honeywell say:

"I know it'll be all right, but you come in anyway to-morrow morning to make sure."

The twelfth juror chosen, early in the afternoon the prosecutor began his presentation of "the case of the people of the State of Texas against Chester Forest." Upon Nan, his indignant accusations of her father, his

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air of triumphant certainty as he questioned witnesses, fell like the strokes of a lash. He brought out and dangled before the jury all those fugitive, intruding doubts and inferences that at moments had come to distress and cloud her mind. It seemed to her that the pale-bearded man was a dreadful instrument of vengeance raised in the name of Dick Brothers to ruin her father.

In spite of her growing anxiety, however, she hung with breathless attention on Husted's gestures, the glances and movements of witnesses, the occasional interruptions of the attentive judge. She had minutes of respite when Kearns took the State's witnesses for savage cross-examination or rose suddenly to growl, "Your Honor, I object!" to Husted's irrelevant questioning of a man on the witness stand.

It was an afternoon of misery for Nan. In her after-supper letter to Susan Dines, she wrote:

"I just can't tell you what happened; it seemed so cruel and unjust to Dad! But Mr. Kearns says to cheer up and wait to hear what our witnesses have to say. Of course, I will do my best to follow Uncle Billy's advice, but it is hard just now to 'keep a stiff upper lip'. . . ."

Before she folded the letter into its envelope, Julia Ellery gave her a boldly-written half sheet to inclose:

"Dear Nancy has been superb—a wonderful comfort to her adoring father! I don't think I need to tell you she has been a joy to me!"

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Nan read the sentences at Mrs. Ellery's nod, was fascinated by their compact exuberance, and touched by her praise.

"You do use words beautifully!" she exclaimed.

"I can only do my little best." Mrs. Ellery smiled modestly. "In my work, I find it is helpful to strew the way, as it were, with such blossoms of rhetoric as I can pluck. My audiences appreciate them." Because it seemed a heaven-sent opportunity to divert Nan's mind from brooding anxiety and perhaps (who could say?) turn the girl's undoubted charm and talent into the same fruitful channels, Julia Ellery spoke further of her career as an organizer and lecturer.

"Mr. Ellery, before he passed on, a little over five years ago, got me interested in the work of organizing the Daughters," she explained. "He was an enthusiastic fraternalist; you may have heard of him—he was very prominent in the Southern Gleaners?"

"No," Nan admitted. "Dad joined the Foresters when we lived in Missouri, but I expect he's dropped out."

"What a pity! Mr. Ellery used to say that every man ought to have the support and comfort of a noble fraternal order. And every woman, too—that's why he encouraged me to help found the Daughters as an auxiliary to the Gleaners. Some day you must attend one of our meetings."

Gabe Horner arrived on the morning train, and came with Kearns to the Court House. He was sure that

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Forest would be freed, and he made Nan share his confidence. Through his cool, humorous and unshakable testimony, Kearns established Brothers's reputation as a quarrelsome and domineering man who habitually carried a pistol and was free with threats to use it. Those who first examined his body testified that an empty holster was found under his unbuttoned vest. The pistol had not, however, been discovered.

More jubilant even than Nan at the trend of the day's testimony, Forest sat with glowing eyes and expanding chest. A kind of nervous geniality quickened his gestures and nods as Kearns stooped to consult him. Not only Nan, but Julia Ellery, from her seat at the rear, was conscious of the change in him. Pleased at sight of his new animation, she thought:

"There's something boyishly appealing and attractive about him. . . . What a pity his wife died before Nancy was old enough to take hold!"

Kearns put Forest on the stand to tell of his dealings with Brothers, the quarrel and the shooting at the isolated Bird Creek feed lot. Under the lawyer's adept questioning, he told the story briefly and simply. Only on Husted's cross-examination did he revert to melodrama, when he cried:

"Yes, sir, he pulled his gun on me! He sure tried to run a bluff over me, but I called him!" Kearns was up in a flash, to interject with a toss of his head towards the jury:

"As any red-blooded man would in this free and

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independent commonwealth that was carved out by Sam Houston!" The prosecuting attorney's protest was automatic, swift, but the jury had been impressed.

Nan, who had shrunk into herself at her father's boast, looked her gratitude at Kearns, and Julia Ellery breathed freely again.

At eleven, Kearns finished with his last witness, figuring that Husted would probably run over the next hour in his speech to the jury and annoy them by keeping them in the box well beyond their usual mid-day feeding time. In fact, the judge interrupted the prosecutor at a quarter to one to adjourn court for an hour.

After dinner, returning to the theme of the missing pistol, full-fed and somewhat short-winded, Husted attacked his peroration. Forest had shot down an unarmed man. He rang the changes on this, intoning it solemnly with hands raised to heaven, whispering it as he leaned across the railing of the jury box, shouting it dramatically with outthrust beard quivering, his voice rousing Mrs. Honeywell, at the little restaurant across the Square, to remark dryly:

"I reckon Husted must be about done hangin' that feller." She went upstairs for a final look around.

To Nan, sensitive and tight-strung, the prosecutor's manner was terribly earnest and menacing. Her father sat hunched and stricken, his grip on her fingers gradually tightened. Kearns listened, slumped in his chair, with an air of absolute detachment.

As Husted sat down, mopping his forehead, Kearns

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rose deliberately, smiled broadly at Forest and Nan, stood silent for some seconds looking at the jury. Cocking his big, homely head slightly sideways, with eyes half closed in a quizzical squint, he thrust his hands into his coat pockets and drawled:

"Well, now that Mr. Husted has stopped for breath, suppose we get down to the evidence in this case." There was immediate response from the jurors, smiles, pleased quick glances from one to another, movements of relaxation. As Kearns went on with his conversational analysis of the evidence, they settled to attitudes of close attention. Nan felt her father's grip on her hand loosen. He was giving silent, hearty approval, filling the rôle of spellbound spectator.

Nan was so completely absorbed herself that she failed to note either the entrance of Mrs. Honeywell, who tiptoed to a seat beside an open window giving upon the Square, or the soft-footed exit of Julia Ellery.

Kearns made a quiet, telling comparison of Forest and Brothers, their characters and circumstances; one an ambitious poor man, who had lived at peace with the world, driven to defend himself from the other, a bully.

As he proceeded, the lawyer increased the tempo of his speech and raised his voice:

"Dick Brothers sowed the tempest and reaped the whirlwind! Driven to extremity, Forest acted. Why?"

The lawyer turned suddenly, dramatically towards Nan and spread his arms in a gesture of appeal, and

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the girl's heart leaped as the gaze of the jurors shifted to her. With flushed cheeks, she listened as Kearns pictured the three years' struggle of father and child, since Mrs. Forest's death, "to save the little home which that good woman had loved, up yonder in the long grass country that is calling to so many of the finest citizens of Texas!"

He came to the climax of his speech:

"Could there be a greater tragedy in the life of a child—" He paused impressively, drew a handkerchief from a pocket, crushed it for a moment in his hand and dropped it on the table. At the open window, Mrs. Honeywell raised her handkerchief to her eyes. "At this tenderest, most impressionable age," he repeated deliberately, "can there be a greater tragedy than such a separation as Chester Forest's conviction—"

Across the sleepy, sun-drenched Square and into the open windows of the court house came apparently random notes from a piano, as of one practicing. Tentatively, experimentally a woman's voice rose above the sound of the piano and the vague noises in the Square:

"The clock in the steeple is striking—
The clock in the steeple is striking the hour."

Kearns completed his sentence: "would impose upon the yearning, passionate heart of Nancy Forest!" The singer's voice came clear:

"Father, dear father, come home to me now,
The clock in the steeple is striking the hour!"

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There was appeal and pathos in the words, in the voice that sang them. Kearns turned towards the window, listened a moment and went on to his final sentence without any reference to the song or the singer.

Only the grocer-foreman of the jury, with his realistic iron-gray, mutton-chop whiskers, tilted a knowing head at the interruption.

Nan was crying silently, unrestrainedly, aware in her heart, as Kearns could not be, of the poignant truth of the lawyer's words. Upon Forest, too, they had produced a look of deep self pity, which gave way, as the song ran on to its sobbingly sentimental conclusion, to a wondering stare towards the window. The voice was surely that of Julia Ellery? He looked round at the benches in the rear; she was not in the room. Ah! He knew now. A smart thing for Kearns to think of!

Nan awaited the jury's verdict in the office of the jail, her task of cheering her father growing harder as the hours dragged on without a summons to return to the court room. Kearns came in to add his assurance. Nan went to supper with Mrs. Ellery and saw the jury, under guard, also going out to eat. She returned to her father, and the jury assembled once more, eleven men to listen with increasing disgust to the reiterated jibe of the indomitable grocer:

"You fellows are swayed by sentiment, by that little lawyer's home and mother appeal, that 'father, dear father' song that he stage-managed. Look at the facts,

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the evidence. Don't it show Brothers wasn't armed? Eh?"

"Damfino!" an exasperated young juror exploded at last, "and I don't care. I'm for acquittal. Let's take another vote."

At midnight, the jury filed in before the judge, recalled from The Planters' Hotel, to report that they could not agree upon a verdict. Nan turned a stricken face to her father, but Kearns smiled as he leaned to put a hand on her shoulder and whisper:

"It's all right, Nancy! It was the best I had hoped for. We'll win at the next trial, sure!"

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CHAPTER XIV

A WALNUT CREEK SIREN

JULIA ELLERY was repeating these comforting words when, a week later, she saw Nan settled in the ornate sleeping car "Athenee," with a ticket to Big Grove:

"We'll only have to wait until the September term of court for the new trial; and the next jury's certain to acquit him!"

"I'm sure of it, too," Nan agreed, "and I know you'll look out for Dad and keep him in good spirits, Mrs. Ellery."

"Of course, Nancy darling! Tell your dear aunt we all like your father so much."

She kissed Nan as the conductor called, "all-aboard!" and ran out of the car, to stand alongside and wave until the train's rear lights disappeared from view.

Before dropping off to sleep in the unfamiliar green-curtained cubicle, her brown face, the cascading mass of red-gold hair and her bare tanned forearms dimly reflected in the highly polished surface of the upper berth, Nan arrived at a fairly satisfactory state of mind. Characteristically, she achieved it by thinking hard of the future.

Who would take Uncle Billy's place, next month, as

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working leader of the haying crew? What could she do to help? Merely drive the sulky rake? She wanted to do so much more!

One thing she *could* do before the haying commenced —help to fix the fence around Dad's field, rebuild the rotted pole corncrib and do some "sprucing up" about the little house, where Sam Davis was "baching." Sam could help with the fences and crib; she wondered if Sam would be willing to split and haul enough blackjack logs to build a new crib.

Also—and Nan had a feeling of luxurious freedom to indulge her dreams—there was Tom Winger. Nan caught among the vague reflections above her head a caricature of a pleased smile that mounted from lifting mouth corners to eyes. She would have so much to say to Tom about Texas, Mrs. Ellery's plans, her father!

Aunt Susan had written to tell her of a picnic at Dunkin Grove next Sunday; then there would be the cattlemen's barbecue on the Fourth of July. Would Tom want her to go with him? Nan remembered Ruby Engel's threat to take him away from her, and wondered if he had been seeing more of her during the last twelve days. But Tom hadn't liked Ruby, that was certain.

Still, he might have changed. It seemed to her that she had been away a long time. He might not even want to kiss her again!

But if everything was all right, if Tom and she—

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she might, some day, have to decide between the rival claims of Dad and Tom; between the call of the school in St. Louis, Mrs. Ellery's plan to make a lecturer of her, and the multiplying demands of the land and the folks who were turning it from prairie wilderness to homes and ranches.

In this forcing ground of pioneer struggle, of rapid change, Nan was maturing early into young womanhood. Here, unmarried girls of twenty-one were "old maids," and wives of seventeen assumed the responsibilities of home-makers. Already the Academy, the school in St. Louis, the feast of books at Mrs. Hardwick's, Mrs. Ellery's alluring prophecies seemed unsubstantial beside the familiar tasks of the farm, the unfolding possibilities of hay harvest and cattle ranch. The colors and odors of the prairie had been distilled into her blood; its personal dramas had been printed indelibly upon her brain. She had put down tenacious roots in this wind-swept long grass country!

Sam Davis readily undertook to help her repair the Forest fences and buildings between bouts with the weeds in the corn.

"I'm glad you stirred me up to the job, Nan," he said. "I'd like to see the place ship-shape, even if your pa won't ever come back to it."

"Of course he'll come back, Sam!" Nan asserted, then: "What did you mean, in your letter, by interceding for Dad?"

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"I can't exactly tell you, Nan." The old man's face reflected a puzzled mind. "Only I know how it'll be; I'll be the Lord's instrument for provin' he's innocent —but he won't come back here. We've got to wait His good time, that's all—an' bow to His will."

The day after Nan's return, Tom Winger rode over, hoping for a happy ride with her, only to find her and Sam Davis setting new posts in place of rotting old ones about the Forest cornfield. There was no chance for even a hint of love-making, and Nan could only give him her hand shyly as he dropped his bridle reins and undertook to help her, while exchanging news and gossip. He would receive a post from Sam, who drove along the line of fence and stopped where a renewal was to be made; set its sharpened end as directed; Sam would spit on his palms and lift the iron sledge hammer; Tom would dodge and flinch as it swung down; and Nan would come laughing to press her steadying hand against the post. Between thumps, their exchanges ran staccato-like. Thus Tom:

"Yes, round-up finished—(thump-hah! Sam's explosions of breath prolonged the interruption)—six days ago. Been resting (thump-hah!) day an' night sence. Say, Colbert's givin' a dance Saturday (thump-hah!) night; wouldn't you like (thump-hah!) to come?" And Nan answered:

"Of course (thump-hah!) I'd like it; but (thump-hah!) I'm afraid I can't because Harvey Stokes is coming (thump-hah!) over to talk about a haying

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proposition with Uncle Billy, and he wants (thump-hah!) me to be there." Disappointed, Tom muttered:

"Oh, h— I see. All (thump-hah!) business, ain't you, Nan?" (thump-hah!)

"What did you say, Tom?"

"Nothin'; you're awful (thump-hah!) busy, ain't you?"

"Yes (thump-hah!), but I could get away for Myrtle Dunkin's picnic Sunday." A final "thump-hah!" and Sam Davis turned to seize the lines and drive on to the next broken post. "Now we can hear ourselves talk! What have you been doing these last six days besides resting, Tom?"

"Sort of ridin' herd—on the longhorns an' 'Shorty'. Him an' 'Cherokee Bill' have been right busy gettin' up that dance for Colbert. They sure aim to make it respectable, too. If Jack Hayes gets within ten miles of Colbert's, they're goin' to run him out of the country—"

"Tom, you know I'd love to go," Nan said, troubled by his obvious disappointment, "but I want to do everything I can to help Dad."

"Yes, of course; I know." His answer was tinged with resentment.

"Still—Tom, maybe Harvey would come some other time."

"No," he objected brusquely, "you go ahead an'—"

Sam's impatient call ended their discussion.

Growing more and more irritated and bored, Tom

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stuck it out for an hour, watching her assured, confident movements, answering her questions briefly, unconsciously appraising her in the light of something that Ruby Engel had dropped lightly in his hearing:

"Nan Forest's a natural-born hayseed."

With sunbonnet hanging on her shoulders, her hair tossing in the warm wet wind that had sprung up after an all-night rain; with bare, palm-hardened hands and sun-polished forearms extending from the half sleeves of a brown denim work dress, she certainly presented a strong contrast to Ruby Engel. Ruby had been displaying the best she had to offer during the last few days; a new modesty of bearing and speech, unusual tidiness, careful attention to her nails and complexion, a more discreet use of perfume, a care in dressing that brought out the far from subtle curves of hips and breasts. Out of doors, she wore gloves and a floating blue veil.

Her transformation had disquieted "Shorty." His "loud cracks" and carefree handling of Ruby brought unexpected rebuffs; and Tom, who began by jeering at Ruby's reform and burlesquing "Shorty's" misery, half unconsciously was becoming flattered by her obvious intention to please him.

When he mounted his Nigger horse to ride away, Nan was astonished and asked:

"Tom, won't you stay for dinner? We could have a ride afterwards."

"No, got to be movin'," he answered; but he prom-

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ised to come for Nan on Sunday and go to the Dunkin picnic. As he jog-trotted back to the new "dog house" across Little Walnut Creek from Engel's, the G. H. ranch headquarters into which he and "Shorty" had moved the day before, his disappointment increased. Instead of the long day of riding over the prairie and the joyous companionship he had anticipated, he had merely spent an uncomfortable hour watching Nan work.

Nan, too, was disappointed, a little hurt—their first meeting after separation, too!

It was noon when he reached the "dog house" ("damn well-named, too," he thought, for it was only a crude log cabin set in a ten-acre wire-inclosed horse pasture). There was no sign of either "Shorty" or "Cherokee Bill" Ridge. ("They'll rustle a good feed from some nester," Tom reflected enviously.) He tied his Nigger horse under the shed-stable and was reluctantly going to tackle the little cookstove when he heard Ruby Engel's hail from the wire gate:

"Hello, Tom; come an' open the gate!" When she had ridden inside and slipped from her ancient side saddle heavily into Winger's uplifted arms, she asked:

"You ain't alone, are you, Tom?"

He laughed at the obvious transparency of the girl—she knew as well as he that he was alone, and he knew as well as she that she had spotted him riding back from the Forest place and had followed him.

"No, I ain't alone." He grinned at her, a challenge

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in his face inspired in part by the feeling of disappointment he had brought with him and in part by animal appetite which she and the lush young summer had roused. He surprised a look of vexation on her face, then added: "My Nigger horse is out in the shed. Want to go for a ride?"

"Sure." Ruby flashed a glance of relief at his answer, then provocatively:

"You ain't in a hurry, are you?" Tom shook his head, still looking at her with a grin. "You might fix my saddle then." She handed him the reins and went toward the door of the cabin. He turned from his inspection of the cinch to call:

"Don't go in there; the place ain't fit to be seen!" But she had already stepped over the log sill. Tom went to stand at the door.

"Here," he begged, "come out. That ain't no place—"

"Come an' put me out!" she challenged, raising the scented veil and baring her teeth in a smile of invitation. Tom stepped into the cool semi-gloom of the earth-floored room and she came to meet him, her moistly black and languishing eyes raised to his as she whispered, "If you dare!"

A blood-stirring, pulsing surge of desire mounted in him. He remembered, with a mingling of shame and thrill, the opening phases of a nearly forgotten episode at San Antone, when a full-lipped half-Mexican girl, with her flaming black eyes and tossing head, had chal-

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lenged his young manhood and blinded him by her passion.

"Oh, hell!" he despaired silently, aware that the defenses he had raised, and believed to be impregnable, against the Dolores type were going down. He took Ruby in his arms, forced her eyes to lower with a look and crushed her lips in a fierce, passionate kiss. For a time, her arms clung round his neck and the generous curves of her body pressed close against his hard slenderness, then she began to push with her hands against his chest.

"Oh, you mustn't, Tom!" she protested shakingly. "Don't! You're too rough. No, no!" and she twisted her head sideways. He still held her close, however, muttering tense words, fragments of sentences, in her ear. At length, she wrenched herself free, adjusted her hat and veil, laughed mockingly at the unleashed beast in Winger's eyes.

"My, Tom, you're a terror!" she whispered admiringly.

Before she left, Tom asked her to go to the Colbert dance with him.

On Sunday, as Tom rode to the Dunkin Grove picnic with Nan, his Nigger horse carried a double burden. The invisible one was a Tom burning with the fire of recent kisses from Ruby's full-blown lips, the physical consciousness of her warm, curving breasts against him as she strained to his embrace, the strong perfume of

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her, devastating and pervasive. His other, visible self was abstracted, short of speech, deeply ashamed, impatient of Nan's chatter—her eager account of the conference with Harvey Stokes, the decision as to the hay, Harvey's plan to build a cook wagon for his haying and baling outfit and buy a threshing machine for employment during the fall and early winter amongst the wheat farmers who had increased in number east of Walnut Creek. He found himself uninterested. For the time, Nan seemed a pale shadow, cool, vaguely sweet, but infinitely young and utterly ignorant of the hot substratum of "life." Listening to her animated talk, he defended his lack of response by arguing, to himself:

"Hell, cattle's the only business for me! These here nesters are all right, hard workers an' all that, but when you come right down to it they're the worst enemies the cattleman has. An' they ain't excitin'; look at old Sam; an' look at Billy Dines, all crippled up by a hay team! An' this fellow Stokes Nan's talkin' about ain't nothin' but a big rube. They run in ruts, like a farm wagon. Me, I like to cut out across the prairie on a horse, hit the breezes."

And he thought of Ruby's contempt for "hayseeds," her resolve not to be "swamped under no haystack," but to see that she had a "high old time" as long as she could wiggle.

In the effort to turn Nan's thoughts to matters that interested him, he rode close and said:

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"Say, Nan, I've got some news. I got a letter from Gabe Horner yesterday tellin' me he's goin' to stake me an' 'Cherokee Bill' to a herd of our own. Last time he was up, he was talkin' about it. Says he'll do it if I'll stay on as foreman of his outfit an' let Bill look after our stuff."

Nan listened with eager attention, and broke out enthusiastically:

"Oh, that's fine, Tom! I'm so glad." She laughed joyously. "Wouldn't it be fine if Uncle Billy and I sold you the rest of that thousand tons of hay we're going to put up?"

Somehow, her comment was disappointing. "It's the way a hayseed *would* look at it!" he reflected.

The picnic was dull to Tom: rope swings suspended from high branches of walnut trees; childish round games on a patch of velvety grass near the creek bank; horseshoe pitching contests; a tug-of-war between mixed teams of grunting boys and screaming girls; furtive dashes to a concealed swimming hole by the boys; strawberry pie comedy when luncheon baskets were opened. Childish! With the strong flavor of Ruby's overemphasized femininity affecting him, he wondered that he had once been able to enjoy such romping foolishness.

Despite her clear, deep conviction that Tom cared, Nan was affected by his mood. After supper, while the sun was setting over the grass-covered northern slope of Coyote Ridge and sifting golden shafts of

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light through the leaves of spraying elms and towering sycamores, she let him lead her away from the all-but-deserted picnic ground, her hand in his, silent and troubled. Once out of sight, Tom slipped his arm about her slender, uncorseted waist and muttered:

"Give me a good kiss, Nan!" Her heart raced as, with shining eyes, she turned her mouth up to his. But at his savage hug and the fierce pressure of his hot lips, she cried a smothered, indignant protest:

"Stop, Tom! I don't like that. Please!"

Chilled, Tom released her, turned with a half-contemptuous smile away from her startled gaze.

"No," he thought disappointedly, "she sure ain't in Ruby's class. She don't even know how to kiss." Nan put her hand on his arm and said softly:

"I do like you, Tom, but—but—" She found it hard to say that she had felt fright and repulsion at his display of passion, knowing nothing of its muddied source.

"Well, all right; I'm sorry, Nan," Winger apologized, and walked moodily at her side.

"Let's go home!" Nan begged, and presently they rode away, saying little to one another. At the Dines gate, when she had dismounted, she offered timidly, chokingly:

"You may kiss me good night, Tom."

He leaned from his saddle to brush her lips with his perfunctorily and left her stricken into a figure of dumb young tragedy, still frightened by his display of passion,

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puzzled by his resentment of her rebuke. She remained awake long after she had kissed her aunt and gone up to bed, wondering about Tom, wondering why she had displeased him. Before sleep came, however, she had braced her spirit by the firm conviction, repeated over and over:

"If he really likes me" (timidly, she shied from the word 'love'), "he'll understand."

Tom rode back to the "dog house" in a tumult of anger, regret, contempt for himself and scorn of Nan's virgin timidity. "I was a fool to think about her that way!" and "She's nothin' but a red-headed icicle!" and "Hell, a fellow only lives once; Ruby for me!" and "Old Shorty's right, you get your fun with them that knows!" Unsatisfactory reflections, but the best he could produce to justify his sudden infatuation with the Engel girl.

The following weeks were a crowded, harried, disturbing period for Nan. She decided not to return to finish the brief remaining term at the Academy, but to see her father's place restored to order before the long grind of haying began. As she went, resolutely cheerful, about her work, she was conscious of an underrhythm of contradictory emotions and convictions. He loves me (she had accustomed herself to the word), he loves me not, alternated in her thoughts until it became clear that Tom was consciously avoiding the possibility of seeing her alone. Then, brave-heartedly if miserably, she endeavored to put him out of her thoughts.

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Quietly, efficiently, Harvey Stokes led his haying crew in the task he had undertaken—the stacking of five hundred tons of hay for Billy Dines before the end of July. At the same time, with Dines's moral backing and his hobbling presence on the scene, Sam Davis proved himself a competent boss of the home crew; and Nan saw a fresh thirty-ton stack "topped off" every second day of unbroken sunshine.

Meanwhile, under Ruby's captious dominance, Tom was enduring a fantastic jumble of emotional experience. Now she was maddeningly sweet and tantalizing, now jeering; she had promised heaven in her kisses yesterday, only to consign him to hell with her scorn to-day; now she was all his, now she was dazzling "Shorty" by her languishing smiles and unspoken promises. Then the two men quarreled, and "Shorty" abruptly quit and went back to Texas. Regretting his outburst of temper, Tom telegraphed Gabe Horner to keep "Shorty" on the Texas ranch and send him another puncher.

The new cowboy, a lank, long-chinned and squint-eyed "wise *hombre*" of thirty-five, immediately earned for himself a nickname by getting gloriously drunk on "jumbo," a prohibition country drink made from drug store "extracts" and home brew. When sober and on the job, "Jumbo" Cox was an efficient cow hand. He also proved to be an enterprising suitor of Tot Colbert, a good pal, and an admirer of Tom's taste in girls; and soon there was organized, informally, a "good

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times quartet": Tot, Ruby, "Jumbo" and Tom, which became a nucleus for gay impromptu dances at Henry Bear's, or at old Motey Tiger's less commodious cabin.

Two days before the widely advertised Fourth of July barbecue, given by the cattlemen, Gabe Horner arrived from Texas to look over his herd of fattening longhorns and "sort of circulate" amongst the other cattlemen and neighbors. He knew that the barbecue was offered as a token of friendship, and with the help of old "Sofkey" Horseford he made sure that everybody living along the two Walnut Creeks was cordially invited. They ate dinner with Billy Dines, and when the hay hands left the table Horner talked about Tom Winger and his plans for him. Beaming at Nan, who kept her eyes down, he boasted genially:

"Tom's sure a mighty good cowman, the kind you can't afford to keep on wages! If everything goes right, the way I expect it will, he's goin' to be a leadin' citizin of this here country some day, an' "—the cattleman paused to look pointedly at Nan—"some gal's goin' to be in luck when she lands that boy!" After he left, Susan Dines asked Nan if Tom meant to take her to the barbecue. Nan met her aunt's penetrating look with a bravely-summoned smile.

"I don't know, Aunty; he hasn't asked me yet."

At a hint from Gabe Horner that was somewhat plainer than a barn door, Tom made a half-hearted effort to resume his relations with Nan. He rode over to find her driving Bess and the sulky rake about a

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rectangle of mowed grass, and mumbled something about going to the barbecue, "if I ain't called away over to the Osage country." Nan laughed.

"I'll not expect you till I see you, Tom, but I hope you *can* go."

He had no intention of going, either with Nan or Ruby. To be seen there with the Engel girl was an advertisement of his infatuation that he was not yet foolish enough to publish, and to take Nan would infuriate Ruby. When he repeated to her his story of being called to the Osage country on the Fourth, she favored him with a wide-eyed stare of incredulity and the comment:

"You can't get away with that to me, Tom; I know there ain't no Osage strings on you. Listen!" She came to him, put her lips close to his ear and whispered: "Sweetie, I got a reason why I want to go to White Oak with you. You won't be sorry!" She suggested, rather than promised, a consummation of their affair; and explained her own arrangements for the day.

"Ma an' pa'll leave for the doin's about half after nine. You an' 'Jumbo' ride over about ten. Tot'll be there, an' us four'll have a time goin' over together! Tell 'Jumbo' to bring some good stuff to drink—a barbecue can be awful dry."

Cox approved Ruby's plan, had a special session with Jack Hayes and returned "all heeled with the genuine, aged-in-the-wood stuff, fit fer ladies to drink." He

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had two full quarts of it, plus a half-pint, which he flashed on Tom before breakfast on the Fourth.

"Say, Tom, try a sniff of this fer what ails you," he challenged as the foreman was going out to saddle his Nigger horse for flight. Tom stopped and sampled the bottle. He smiled appreciatively.

"Say, this is good stuff! Where'd you snag it?"

"Sure a ladies' drink, ain't it?" and "Jumbo" tilted the bottle before passing it to Tom a second time. "Go on an' be liberal with yourself! I got two quarts wropped up in my saddle pockets, an' the 'quartet' will sure fly high this day."

Tom drank, and reflected:

"Hell, we won't any of us get to that barbecue today." Fired by the whisky and the implied promise of Ruby, he loped across the creek with "Jumbo" at ten o'clock, repeating to himself: "A man only lives once, an' Cox has the right idea about drink and girls, too—take 'em when you can get 'em!"

They found Ruby and Tot waiting on the kitchen porch, with a row of four coarse tumblers and a tin bucket filled with water, in which floated a gourd dipper.

"Bring on your poison, 'Jumbo'!" Ruby called.

"Hot dog, gals, I sure got her!" the cowboy answered. . . .

At noon, the barbecue apparently forgotten, the four crossed Little Walnut Creek and went to the "dog house" to prepare, in a fumbling riot of laughter and

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scuffling, a feast of their own. In the middle of the afternoon, they rode to Motey Tiger's cabin to dance. Finding it deserted, "Jumbo" took down the old man's fiddle, propped himself carefully against the head of the stout home-made bed and began to drag hesitant, lugubrious tunes from its greasy belly. Tom tried vainly to dance, to fit his step to Ruby's and then to Tot's. It was no good; and the three went to lounge on the big bed at "Jumbo's" feet while Tom repeated slowly and solemnly:

"He's best fiddler in the worl'!"

Presently, Ruby drew Tot aside for a whispered conference. Tot nodded understandingly and agreed:

"Sure, I'll look after my little 'Jumbo'—an' myself, too. Scoot!"

"Come now, Sweetie," Ruby cooed to Tom, putting an arm under his neck. "Let's ride. 'Jumbo's' fadin' out, an' we'll hit the trail for some more excitement!"

"Where we goin'?" Winger inquired thickly, laughed confusedly and apologized carefully: "'Scuse me, Queenie, I don't mean where we goin'. I don' give a whoop s'long's you're with me, see?"

"That's right, Sweetie!" Ruby approved, "an' we'll take along some drinks, too." And she headed straight towards the grove on White Oak Creek, five miles away, where she meant to find Nan Forest, show her something and say a few words that were weighing on her mind.

It was near sunset when they arrived. Billy Dines

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was hinting that it was time to hitch up the team and return to the farm, and Nan was walking across to the Dunkin wagon, arm in arm with Myrtle, to say good night to Mrs. Dunkin and Paul when Ruby and Tom rode into the grove.

Tom was drunk, lost in a hazy, waking dream in which the stirring, shuffling crowd and the little fires, shining faintly under the trees, raced round and round in undulating circles. Dimly aware of his surroundings, he began to struggle for self-control, tried vainly to haul on his bridle reins and turn his Nigger horse away. But Ruby, who had drunk with discretion in anticipation of this moment, took his hand and urged him forward. They rode directly in front of Nan and Myrtle Dunkin before Ruby pulled up.

"Say, Tom," she called loudly, "here's some friends of ours." She leaned close to him as Nan looked up startled, and cooed: "Sweetie, here's Nan Forest. Ain't you goin' to speak to your little hayseed friend?"

Still struggling to focus himself in a whirling universe, Tom grinned, swayed and began to speak:

"Oh, h'lo, Nan—" Then, for a moment, he caught the stricken, astonished look on Nan's face, and the world suddenly steadied. Something that seemed dagger-sharp struck deep into his consciousness; he saw Nan and Myrtle dodge around the horses and run, gaspingly, toward the Dunkin fire; he heard Ruby hurl a foul, clear-voiced epithet after Nan; and then, sick-

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eningly, she turned her wide, moistly tender eyes upon him and invited softly:

"Now, let's ride, Sweetie, wherever you say."

With infinite deliberation, fighting against the pull of a landscape that would not cease from reeling, he gathered the slack reins of his Nigger horse, braced himself for coherent speech and independent action. He met the girl's look with eyes that flamed with despairing hate, and said slowly:

"Damn you—you *have* play—ed hell!" He pulled Nigger's head up sharply, dug in the spurs and galloped off. As he went, Ruby's insolent laugh and jeering words reached him:

"Good night, Mr. Winger. Come an' see me soon!"

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CHAPTER XV

TO MAKE A PRAIRIE HOLIDAY

NAN had done a brave thing on the morning of the Fourth when, at Tom Winger's failure to appear, she helped Susan Dines hitch Bess and Cricket to a farm wagon, carried out the basket of "trimmings" for the barbecue feast and took her place behind her aunt and Uncle Billy on a pile of hay. She dared to be a "hayseed," while every other girl and boy who could command horse and saddle rode to White Oak Grove in more or less successfully imitated cowboy get-up.

A braver thing, however, was her return as, with leaden heart and a choking sensation in her throat, she fought off her misery and leaned forward to talk with the old people, who knew nothing of Winger's appearance or Nan's humiliation. Pleased and happily reminiscent, Susan Dines broke forth as soon as they started home:

"Such a mixture of folks I never did see before! White, red an' black, all shades; Indians, mixed-bloods, niggers, whites; cowmen, haymen, farmers, storekeepers, traders, lawyers an' just town folks. All excited, seemed like, an' havin' a good time, hot an' shinin' with barbecue grease!" She turned her head to ask:

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"Did you like the speakin', Nancy?"

"It *was* fine," the girl answered. "Especially Mr. MacLaren, from San Antone. Wasn't he funny?"

"Yes." Susan Dines's assent seemed a bit reluctant. "But all the same, him an' his kind ain't got any love for us plain farmer folks; they're out to turn this into a cattle country. Ain't that so, Billy?"

"You sure said it, Sue," Dines agreed. "Them fellers can see what's comin'. They know us nesters'll crowd 'em off the free ranges—same's others have done before."

The two old folks talked on, while Nan sank back into her own thoughts. For the hundredth time, she was trying to shut off from her mind's eye a wounding vision: Ruby Engel's hand, in a soiled white thread glove, clasping Tom's as she pulled him close, swaying and grinning, to say, " 'Sweetie,' here's your little hayseed friend." So he was Ruby's "Sweetie"? A sickening term! And why should she care? Her claims on Tom. . . . Had she any? Some rides together, a few kisses—they had liked one another . . . but what *could* he see in Ruby?

"I wonder," Billy Dines speculated, "why Vergil Stokes riz up to spout that about the Shorthorn yearlin' an' the steam plow layin' down together in peace?"

Nan had the answer and, wrenching her thoughts away from Winger, explained:

"That was because of Harvey's talk about buying a big gang sod-plow to hitch his traction engine to next

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spring; Vergil was breaking the news to the cattlemen."

"Steam plow, eh?" Susan Dines chuckled, pointed to the enveloping fly nets draping Bess's and Cricket's harness, with added belly protectors. "Well, it'd sure be a good joke on the greenhead flies!"

"Harve ought to do well with a steam breakin' outfit," Billy Dines approved. "In the next few years, there's goin' to be millions of acres of this prairie grass turned under; an' there's coal to run his engine 'most anywhere he wants to dig down a few feet for it."

"Jennie tells me Vergil's goin' to run for the tribal council," Susan Dines continued the gossip concerning the Stokes family. "Vergil says he's goin' to show what a 'squawman' can do down there in the timber about makin' laws that'll suit Indians an' whites, too."

"I wouldn't wonder if he got elected," Billy Dines said. "He's right popular." Then with an endorsing nod: "Both them boys ought to do well. . . . Did you notice how Harve run up them three wagons an' rigged a tripod out'n their poles so's to sling a side of beef with trace chains for roastin' over the fire? Seems kind of slow, but he's sure got a knack for doin' things by machinery."

Driving slowly home over the twisting prairie road, the three thus reviewed the day's doings, indulged in tentative prophecies, fell silent as the wagon rattled

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down to Little Walnut crossing and emerged into the deepening shadows of the trees. Only Nan thought:

"What a miserable ending to a day of such good fun!" In spite of Tom's absence she had been stirred to a tingling, happy excitement by the good-humored boisterousness of the surging, strangely-mixed crowd The hundreds who had come to share the cattlemen's hospitality seemed to presage a new and wonderful blossoming of life, to symbolize the hope that good fellowship and coöperation would prevent a possible clash of rival interests. Now and again during the day Nan had said to herself:

"If Dad were only here, and if Tom hadn't had to go off on that Osage business!" For it had not occurred to her to doubt the cowboy's word.

Nan's thoughts were brought back to the present by the stopping of the team at the barn lot gate, and as she jumped out to open it she said to herself defiantly:

"Anyway, I did have a good time until—"

Too miserable in mind and body even to seek the relief of curses, Tom rode to Motey Tiger's cabin and roused "Jumbo," whom Tot Colbert had left sleeping heavily; and just before the two piled into their bunks, "Cherokee Bill" Ridge came across from Engel's and called Tom outside.

"Say," the young Indian spoke with a slow embarrassment, "I talk with Ruby just now. She ask me if I tell you somethin': she want you go see her to-

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morrow." Bill's round black eyes were turned inquiringly upon his foreman's face. Winger answered bitterly:

"I don't reckon you told her, with my compliments, to go to hell?"

"No," Bill grinned, "but I think maybe so she damn sorry."

Neither Tot nor "Jumbo," whom Ruby later enlisted as Cupid's messengers, had any better luck. He felt only a deep disgust where he had been infatuated. He spent the afternoon with Gabe Horner riding the hills west of Little Walnut and picking the range for the Winger-Ridge herd that was to be sent up from Texas in the spring. Before Horner and Tom rode to Big Grove, Bill was called in and the new brand decided upon—"W-R."

"Tom," said Horner as the two sat on a baggage truck at the Big Grove station waiting for the southbound "Flyer" which the cattleman was to take, "you ought to get married."

"That's right," Winger admitted lifelessly.

"Sure, you ought to get married." And after a significant pause: "I've been thinkin' a heap about that Forest gal. . . . Seems like she's a gal that just naturally sticks in your mind, like a cockleburr sticks in a mule's tail . . . huh?"

"That's right, too!" But Tom made no further comment, and turned his head to stare along the glinting, northward reaching rails for sight of the overdue

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train. Not from him would Gabe Horner hear of his dam'fool conduct with Ruby Engel and the manner in which he had "queered himself forever" with Nan. It would be too bitter a confession to make to the old friend who had shown his faith in him!

An innocent remark revealed to Susan Dines the gulf that had opened between Nan and Tom Winger. In the after-dinner pause on the day following the barbecue, when the haying crew had departed, the old woman suggested:

"Nancy, I wish you'd let me talk to Tom next time he comes over. Livin' like them boys do, I bet there's a whole lot of mendin' an' darnin' that'd ought to be done for him."

"He won't ever come again, Aunty." Nan's dull, positive answer roused a sharp inquiry; and after the scene at the barbecue had been described, Susan Dines kissed a tear-wet cheek and consoled:

"Never mind, honey lamb. . . . 'Course you liked him, an' I don't wonder you feel miserable."

Nan shook her head dumbly, turning away. Tactfully the old woman heard the call of the preserving kettle and confided to its bubbling depths: "Booze an' that Engel piece; good devil's bait, both of 'em! I thought he was a mighty nice boy, too." After a while Nan came to stand close to her and take her hand.

"Aunty, I'm never going to think of him again!"

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"Of course not, honey lamb," she soothed. "Now you help me get these jars ready for the preserves."

"I never did think of him," Nan went on stoutly, "except as a friend that I liked to be with." She choked back a sob.

"No, I could see that, Nancy. . . . Well, as I always say, men's as plentiful as blackberries. Some's ripe, some's green, some's good an' some's bad. . . . Now I wonder if you hadn't better get Bess out of the barn an' peg off to the hayfield. Sam Davis says this July sun wilts the cut grass mighty quick."

When Nan departed, Susan Dines sought her husband, seated at the whirling grindstone in the scant shade of a young maple tree, sharpening the triangular blades of the mower's sickle.

"Billy," she said, interrupting the shrill whine of the grinding song, "I wish you'd find out if Tom Winger ain't headin' for destruction with the help of Ruby Engel an' rot-gut whisky!"

"Hey? What's that, Sue?" Billy Dines listened to the story with a glare of angry astonishment, and observed resentfully: "He's a hell of a fellow to be castin' sheep's eyes at Nan! You bet I'll find out!"

"Well," his wife advised, more mildly, "don't go talkin' too much. Maybe. . . . Anyway, Nancy'll get over it all right. . . . Only, I'd like to know just how things stand with him an' that Engel gal."

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CHAPTER XVI

PLAIN SALT AND COMMON CLAY

HARVEY STOKES became conscious of Nan's developing womanhood gradually, and yet suddenly—in much the same way a farmer might become aware of spring. Yesterday the familiar slender willow shoot beside the frozen pasture stream was merely a graceful, satin-barked wand; to-day its swelling buds catch the eye and stir the imagination to picturing imminent leafage and caressing sunshine.

At the conference about the hay, disappointed as she felt at giving up the fun of going to the Colbert dance with Tom, Nan had nevertheless given her mind to the discussion of the work that was to help her father. Drawing her chair close to Harvey's in order to check his calculations, she followed his laborious manipulations of fractions with a growing admiration of the certainty of his results. He worked in a literal agony of perspiring concentration until figures were out of the way, then sat back to slow discussion, guarded promises. His broad face, colored by the sun to a dull brick-red up to the point where his low-worn hat preserved a liberal zone of white under his yellow-

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ish hair, showed such obvious single-minded honesty as he talked that Nan said later to her aunt:

"I guess Harvey's just plain salt of the earth."

Nan had touched Harvey's hand, her shoulder had brushed his during the figuring and discussion—accidental contacts that yet stirred the man vaguely, turned his thoughts ever so slightly from the details of the contract he was shaping with Billy Dines. When, paper and pencil put aside, Nan sat back and instinctively pulled down her still rather short skirt, his new impression of her became more definite; and he confirmed it by a fleeting sideways glance at the wide-spaced, firm little mounds of her breasts. A question had been asked and answered in his thoughts:

"How old is Nan? Past sixteen? Yes, that's right; an' older'n her age, too." A slow, dumb admiration of her lithe young beauty, and her obvious quick intelligence was born at that moment in Harvey's brain.

The background of her own mind filled with the image of Tom Winger, Nan was wholly unconscious of any change in Harvey. She followed him to the gate, down the lamp-lighted walk, stroked the thick mane of his stout gray horse, looked up into his face and said:

"Give my love to Jennie—and kiss that darling little nephew of yours for me. I'm coming to steal him some day!" with no realization that Harvey's eyes

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were fixed on her with a new intentness or that the pressure of his awkward big hand was somewhat prolonged.

Almost daily sight of Nan in the long weeks of haying that followed the news Jennie gave him, that Nan and Tom Winger had quarreled, that Winger had fallen for Ruby Engel and that Nan was "actin' as independent as a hog on ice" set Harvey Stokes to dreaming: "What a home a fellow could have with a strong, smart girl like Nan!"

Consigning to oblivion the confirmed bachelorhood he had always professed, after much careful weighing of his chances, Harvey confessed his ambition to Jennie Stokes:

"Why, Harve," she exclaimed, "I thought no girl could ever get your number!" But she liked Nan, and was sure that her big brother-in-law couldn't find a better wife. To help on his slow courtship, sometime later she suggested:

"You ask her over to hear Vergil's speechifyin' next Saturday." Jennie's husband was to launch his campaign for tribal councilor at a neighborhood rally and picnic on Thunder Creek. "I'll have her stay to supper with us, an' you can ride back with her by moonlight. . . . Too bad you hate dances, Harve!"

Vergil's mid-July meeting was welcomed by farmers and haymen as a brief respite in the busy season's grind of hard work; and it drew the Indian and negro voters (negro "freedmen" voted by virtue of membership in

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the tribe granted when they had ceased to be slaves of Indian owners) who were curious to "size up this white man that wants to help make laws for Indians." Also, they were attracted by rumors of the huge iron kettles of lye hominy—"sofkey"—great platters of chicken and dumplings and barrels of lemonade which Jennie Stokes and her women friends meant to provide after the speaking.

"Well, of all things!" was Susan Dines's comment when Nan told her of Harvey's invitation; and on Friday she accompanied Billy Dines to Big Grove. In the evening, she brought out for Nan's delighted approval a new side saddle, bridle and decorated saddle cloth.

"Might as well go in style, Nancy," she beamed. "I been intendin' to fix you up for gaddin', an' I expect it's time." The old woman was pleased by the girl's response to Harvey's interest, her resolute determination to forget Winger; and Stokes was, in Susan Dines's opinion, a "good catch."

In his dumb fashion, Harvey recognized his golden opportunity and sought to overcome the heavy embarrassment he felt at riding with Nan as a suitor. Admiration shone from his gray eyes, unexpected shrill laughter forced its way upwards from his broad chest and bull-like throat, and a deeper red flowed over his brick-red cheeks. But he had only brief answers, dull comments to oppose to Nan's chatter.

Nan felt a sense of relief when Jennie ran out to

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meet them on their arrival, even though Jennie confided in a whisper:

"Nan, Tom Winger's here, an' so is Ruby, but they didn't come with one another. She came with Bill Ridge."

Nan was conscious of burning cheeks and an inner rush of emotion, but she smiled at her friend's agitation; Jennie, looking relieved, invited:

"You an' Harve come an' set with me soon's the speakin' begins. Do you think Vergil can really make a speech?" Before Nan could answer, and while she led them through the crowd, she rattled on: "I'm so worried over the whole thing, but the baby's so good, settin' over there in his little express wagon crowin' an' wavin' his hands at all the people—ain't he cunnin'! I'll have to leave you before the speakin's finished an' see to dishin' the chicken an' dumplin's."

The three found places in old Abe Madden's wagon near the small stand erected for the speakers. Nan and Jennie climbed into the wagon, while Harvey stood leaning against the wheel, as Vergil blew a lusty blast on a cow horn trumpet. Glancing around, Nan saw Winger coming towards the wagon and, in a panic, turned ostentatiously away. Yet out of the corner of her eye, she caught his long look at her, saw him stop abruptly, to settle to a squatting position beside good-looking, black-mustached Jack Hayes. Jack had disposed his slender, alert self against the pole of a near-by wagon, a new Stetson hat tipped negligently over one

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restless black eye; as Winger dropped to his side, he returned his low-voiced greeting, but presently rose to come over to Nan and Harvey.

"Hello, Nan! How are you, Harve; how's everything?" Harvey's response was not cordial, but Jack lingered, talking with Nan and teasing Jennie about her husband. Ruby and Bill Ridge passed close; he grinned a cheerful greeting and would have stopped, but Ruby urged him on with the audible command:

"Don't stop, Bill. Them ain't friends of mine!" She piloted him to where Winger squatted, spread her skirts and dropped carefully to sit on a patch of clean grass beside him.

"Well, Tom, here we are!" she said, smiling impudently. He nodded, turning an ironic grin upon her.

"You don't care if we set here, do you?" she spoke with mock humility.

"Set where you please," he answered shortly, "I'll do the same," and he rose, moving negligently away to join a group of cowboys near the speakers' platform. Ruby, with a contemptuous laugh, devoted herself to Bill until "Sofkey" Horseford, chairman of the meeting, called the crowd to order.

Through the slow, considered talk of the rotund, gold-rimmed-spectacled Indian, leading up to the introduction of Vergil Stokes as a candidate, Nan's thoughts threaded themselves like a red strand in a rope.

"Long time now," Nan heard him saying, "Eenyan

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been livin' here in his own country; been livin' easy, gettin' fat like me"—"Sofkey" patted his stomach and smiled—"till white man he come an' say to Eenyan, 'Make some room for me.' Well, all right, but Eenyan say, 'What you goin' to do for me?'"

("White man come." The Indian's challenging tone roused in Nan's mind a half-formulated train of reflections: First comers were men like Billy Dines, true pioneers who understood the Indian, who were plowmen, ambitious to turn the virgin prairie into productive fields. Then followed her father and Engel, restless drifters in the wake of the first comers. On their heels came Gabe Horner and Winger, "Sandy" MacLaren, Nat Webster, Henry LeGendre, cattle pioneers. Latest of the invaders were Harvey Stokes and his kind, intent upon turning the luxuriant wild grass into hay and the hay into cash. What had all of these brought to the Indian? Did he agree with Billy Dines that these white men were teachers? . . . To Nan, the swift transforming years had brought work, anxiety, joy, the first keen heartache. . . . (She had seen Ruby settle to a seat beside Tom, smilingly confident and possessive, before resolutely turning her eyes away.)

"Maybe so," the Indian's voice came through to her consciousness again, "it be a good thing if some white man come down yonder in the timber an' help make laws so all can live in peace. Me, I think we all got

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to be good friends, white an' black an' red; live together, like colors of the rainbow in the sky. So—"

(What, Nan asked herself, would Ruby Engel and Tom Winger make of life "together"? . . . Nan was aware that Tom had been talking with Ruby, and she smiled down at good-looking Jack Hayes, who stood beside the wagon making occasional whispered comments to her and to the distracted Harvey. . . . Tom would see that there were those who cared to be with her!)

"I wish all you folks would listen to talk of this man, my friend!"

The Indian's glinting spectacles were turned upon Vergil, who got to his feet and launched his vivacious, smiling personality in a facetious opening:

"Keep your seats, friends." He raised a warning hand. "The eats ain't ready yet." Laughter met his pause; he grinned and ran a hand through his thick blond hair. "Dog-goned if I know what to say to you all that my fat friend here ain't already said better. . . .

" 'Course us poor intrudin' whites think we've got somethin' to give the Indians. A notion of how white folks live. Maybe it ain't the best way. I don't know. But I know we've got to give an' take in a good many ways. For instance, we've got to have more schools; I don't want my own little old quarter-blood kid growin' up out here on Thunder Creek with no school within ten miles of me."

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(Nan saw Jennie nodding her head approvingly, and her own plan to finish the Academy course and go on to the school of elocution at St. Louis recurred to her mind. She had about given it up; Tom might have crowded it clean out of her mind. . . . Well, now she could indulge her former dream.)

When Jennie slipped away to take command at the food trestles, Nan went with her to help. Presently came Vergil's final shout: "Folks, I want your votes!" followed by the confused bustle of movement towards the improvised tables. Nan saw Winger and Jack Hayes coming straight to the one behind which she stood; she thrust two heaped tin plates at them with a muttered, "Here, Jack"; and Tom ventured:

"Thanks, Nan." His eyes sought vainly to hold hers before he turned to walk away. Jack Hayes, however, hovered close, pretending to keep order in the pushing, jesting crowd in front of the trestle; and after the food disappeared, he insisted upon remaining to help wash and pack the dishes and load them into Vergil's wagon. His high spirits, his obvious attentions, pleased and comforted Nan, sore as she was over Tom's desertion.

Harvey watched with anger and dull resentment Jack's bold tactics. Surely Nan ought to know better than to encourage the attentions of a bootlegger, must know of the talk going around concerning Jack, his brother "Buster" and his sister Kate as friends of certain hard-eyed birds of passage for whom (gossip was

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beginning to say) big rewards were offered by robbed banks and express companies. Surely she must know that the Hayes farm was only a blind for the brothers' outlaw activities.

In fact, neither Nan nor the Dineses had heard this gossip; and when she and Harvey rode back to the Dines place under a mounting, mellow moon and Harvey retailed it with a kind of vindictive relish, Nan refused to take it seriously. Jack was good fun—and also good-looking. Moreover, there had been no drinking at the meeting, and Nan answered Harvey:

"That's strange if Jack *is* a bootlegger!"

"I expect Jack has quit that game," Harvey admitted, and fell silent.

"What awful business is he in now?" she asked lightly.

"Well, nobody's sure," Harvey replied slowly, "but them two boys are away from home a lot, an' there's detectives watchin' the Hayes place—been watchin' ever since that Homeville bank robbery."

"What! It's easy to say things like that—I don't believe one word of it!" It was simply impossible to picture the debonair, laughing Jack Hayes engaged in the furious, bloody battle that had been fought in the Homeville bank and streets.

Harvey merely grunted at Nan's quick retort, and his ride home through the glorious moonlight, after leaving Nan, was keyed to a pessimistic plaint:

"What a ten-thumbed fool I am, anyway!" and

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"Girls beat me!" But he was more determined than ever to win Nan.

Three days later, Nan received from the Big Grove post office a thin, carefully tied parcel. Inside much protective wrapping was a brilliantly-colored lithograph of an incredibly sweet young shepherdess dressed in pink, with roses at her breast and holding a beribboned crook as she watched six adoring lambs. On the back was penciled:

"From the Black Sheep that ain't in the picture." Jack Hayes's name was signed with a flourish.

Flattered, Nan showed it to Susan Dines, who admired it duly and remarked:

"I wonder what that bottom piece he cut off had on it. Advertisin', I guess."

Nan pinned the thing to the wall of the living room.

That evening Jack came to call on Nan, the first of many visits. She liked him, enjoyed his buoyant wit and the glimpses of adventurous life he revealed. He brought a new flavor into the routine of her hard-working days; and Susan and Billy Dines welcomed him, too.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE AMATEUR DETECTIVE

"JACK, you ought to be ashamed to chase Nan Forest the way you're doin'! She's only a kid, an' a darn nice one, too." Kate Hayes's serious brown eyes contracted under frowning brows, and she held her gaze upon her brother until his eyes acknowledged it. "You know what I mean!"

"All right," Jack conceded irritably. "But I do hate to see that dumb Stokes fellow hangin' around her."

"Jealous? You!" Kate laughed scornfully. "Maybe you'd like to marry the girl?"

"No, of course not; but why can't I have a good time with her without you buttin' in?"

"You know why, Jack. It ain't in you to respect a girl's innocence; ain't you had trouble enough already?"

Kate's harangue went on until Jack fled to mount a restive sorrel and gallop away.

As he rode, he admitted to himself that his sister was right; he had no business to intrude between Nan and the highly eligible Harvey Stokes; he must give up the pleasure of driving the hayman indoors of an evening to talk with Susan and Billy Dines while he

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sat outside on the narrow porch with Nan and delighted her with cowboy songs, outlaw ballads and carefully expurgated narratives of his own experiences. Twice he had stood alone with her at the gate, after Stokes had departed in silent rage, and had been aware of the physical tremor that unconsciously stirred her at his nearness.

"A green kid like her—easy!" But Kate was right; she was really too nice a girl to smirch.

Firm in his resolution to avoid Nan, he promised himself that he would never see her again—and found himself on the Dines porch that evening!

As usual, he outstayed Harvey Stokes; and when Susan Dines called "good night!" he moved close to take one of Nan's firm hands from its place of rest on her lap and raise it to his cheek.

"Sweet little hand!" he murmured, and kissed the upturned knuckles.

"Why, Jack!" Nan attempted to pull her hand away, laughing. He captured her other hand, leaned toward her and whispered:

"What do you see in my eyes, girlie?"

"Is it a game, Jack?" Nan looked obediently; "am I supposed to be 'Little Red Riding Hood'?"

"Kiss me, Nan!" he urged, his eyes burning.

"Oh!" Nan exclaimed, disengaging both hands, "I believe you *are* the Bad Wolf!" She rose, pretended to yawn. "I'm too tired and sleepy to play games to-

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night, Jack. Go home—and give my love to Kate."

Jack Hayes began to revise his opinion of Nan.

A stray puff of wind interrupted Harvey Stokes's "figgerin' " as he sat at the round table in the Dines living room; it blew the pink shepherdess picture off the wall and face downwards across his paper. He read:

"From the Black Sheep that ain't in the picture—Jack Hayes." He turned it over, and felt that he had seen the picture before. But it was not just the same—he noted the roughly-trimmed lower edge; something had been cut away; what? Ah, he remembered now! There should be a calendar under the picture—he had seen its duplicate on Clint Alberts's wall—and under the calendar pad the printed words:

"First National Bank, Homeville, Kas." and "Capital $25,000; Surplus $17,500; Deposits $215,000."

Struck by a sudden inspiration, Harvey rolled the lithograph and thrust it inside his shirt; at home, he hid it under his mattress.

Proof that Jack Hayes had helped to rob the Homeville bank? To Harvey, yes; but he knew that for the officers of the law it would be only a trivial clew and no evidence at all. The bank had distributed the lithographs widely, and Jack could have secured one anywhere. In his heart, Harvey was convinced that it was a part of the loot taken by the outlaws, but what could he do? Only wait and watch—a tormenting

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prospect, dominated as he was by the thought of Nan and the peril to her which Hayes represented. How could he warn her without making himself ridiculous? However dull, dumb and stumbling she thought him, he must not give her the chance to ridicule him. If he was right about Jack Hayes, the step he took towards exposing him must be decisive, convincing.

In his deliberate, thorough fashion, therefore, Harvey undertook to spy upon his rival. He moved the camp of his cutting and baling crew to a high prairie plateau overlooking the Hayes place, and contrived to keep the house under observation during the daylight hours. Evenings, he rode his big gray over the trail beaten by Jack's sorrel to the Dines porch, where he sat on obstinately until Nan bade both him and Jack good night.

On one of these evenings, when Billy Dines sat talking with them, the old man mentioned that he had seen at Big Grove a poster offering a reward of $2,000 each for the Homeville bank robbers "dead or alive."

"Gracious, that's a lot of money!" Nan exclaimed. "How many were there, Uncle Billy?" The old man turned to Harvey.

"Five, wasn't they, Harve?" In the two months since the robbery details had become a bit uncertain in his mind.

"Five, yes," Stokes confirmed, and in turn consulted Jack Hayes: "Three got away, didn't they, Jack?" He knew that four had escaped.

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"That's right," Hayes agreed promptly. Harvey grinned secretly. At Nan's urging, to satisfy the curiosity she felt as to the details of the tragic episode that had been played only a few miles away, the three men reconstructed the drama. Rather, Harvey and Billy Dines retold it, with occasional reluctant words of assent or denial from Hayes.

"They know Pat Dawson headed the gang," Harvey said. "They think him an' his brother Bill, from the old stamping ground of the James an' Younger boys up in Missouri, picked up three others down here in the Indian country." He stopped as if puzzled and referred to Hayes: "Lem Starr was the one that got caught, an' Bill Dawson was one of the four that got away, wasn't they?"

"I don't remember," the other denied shortly. Nan interrupted:

"I thought you said only three got away!"

"No, four. Ain't that right, Jack?" Harvey demanded.

"Yes, I think—darned if I can remember," Hayes amended quickly.

"Oh," Harvey said disappointedly, "I thought maybe you'd know." He carried on the story from that point.

"They come up into this neighborhood to lay their plans; ain't that what folks say, Jack?" Hayes shifted his position uneasily before replying to Harvey's question.

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"How the devil do I know!"

"Well, anyway—" and Harvey went on to describe how on the first day of June, at half past nine in the morning, Pat Dawson led his gang, all wearing false beards and with hats pulled low, into Homeville from the south, "plumb up the middle of Main Street till they got to the alley runnin' west between Eighth an' Ninth." Turning into the alley, they tied their horses to a fence, and four of them marched straight out across Main Street and into the First National Bank. The fifth stayed with the horses.

In Pat Dawson's hand was a two-bushel grain sack, and this he tossed over the counter as he thrust a pistol through the cashier's window and ordered that official to "fill her up with greenbacks!" The other three kept the bank clerks and the lone depositor they found inside standing with hands above their heads.

The cashier had an inspiration. The vault door, though unlocked, had not been swung open, and he said:

"Boys, the time lock's on, an' I can't open her till nine-forty-five. Five minutes to wait." Dawson had growled:

"All right, friend; go an' stand ready to swing her back!"

At this point, Harvey ventured an improvisation:

"One fellow locked the front door an' sort of walked around lookin' at the pictures on the wall. Kind of nervous like, an' they say he took away one of them

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fancy calendars—don't know if he kept it." Hayes laughed.

Harvey labored through the story, which ran on like this:

To the locked door came another depositor, glanced inside and turned to run down Main Street crying a warning. He and half a dozen others ran to Irwin's hardware store for rifles, shotguns, pistols and ammunition. By the time the cashier swung the vault door open and stepped inside, a hastily armed committee of welcome had posted its members in doorways and store windows across from the bank and were firing through its plate glass windows. Pat Dawson vaulted the counter and ran to where the cashier was fumbling about in the vault. With a pistol under his ear, the frightened man obeyed Pat's command to "dump them bundles of bills into that sack, an' be damn quick about it!" But he had the presence of mind to choose the bundles of one- and two-dollar bills.

Meanwhile, with one robber keeping the men inside covered, two of Dawson's companions were returning the fire of the citizens. One of the bandits was hit and fell, calling to Pat to come and pick him up and "get to hell out of here!" But Pat left him, deciding that he was too badly wounded to ride, and with the other two ran out the back door, through an alley and, under fire, to the horses. On the way, he took time to shoot Irwin's clerk, who stood resting the barrel of a rifle against the doorpost of the store; then,

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mounted, the four came out on the run, shooting and yelling. They killed another of the home guard and wounded two more. Bill Dawson was hit and fell from his horse at Sixth Street. Seeing him fall, Pat Dawson wheeled, rode back under fire, stooped from his saddle, picked him up and carried him away. One of the fleeing men caught Bill's horse.

"Somewheres down here in the Indian country," Harvey said positively, "they divided up the boodle an' scattered. Somewheres on Thunder Creek it was. Ain't that right, Jack?"

"I guess it is, if you say so," Hayes agreed impatiently.

"Lem Starr, the fellow that got hit in the bank, wouldn't ever tell who any of 'em was, but the Pinkertons knowed Pat an' Bill Dawson was in it, an' they trailed 'em up into Missouri. Who them other two was, an' where they're at now is the mystery. It's them the rewards is out for."

"My, wouldn't it be thrilling," said Nan, whose imagination was stirred, "if you found them on Thunder Creek and captured them!" Her eyes were on Harvey, who made no reply. Jack Hayes permitted himself a slightly sardonic chuckle.

Next day, from his commanding position beside his baler, Harvey saw some one whom he took to be Kate Hayes, bonneted and carrying a tin bucket, ride away from her house and disappear in a plum thicket that

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bordered the creek. Presently she returned, and in a few minutes Jack Hayes left the house riding south. On the following day, the performance was exactly repeated; and on the third day, as Harvey was considering what he ought to do, if anything, he was astonished to see, as the wind blew the supposed Kate's skirt aside, a man's topboots below the hem. Waiting until the rider had returned to the house and Jack had taken the southward trail, Harvey went by a roundabout way to the plum thicket, reasoning out the puzzle as he walked:

"If Jack an' 'Buster' did help rob that bank, they sure hid their two-fifths of the money down there by the creek. They'd ought to have somethin' like ten thousand dollars, mostly in small bills. Quite a bulk of money! Jack's gettin' oneasy, an' he's shiftin' it a little at a time—takin' away what he can carry in his pockets, an' doin' it in broad daylight because he knows he's shadowed at night. . . . As for 'Buster,' he's doin' honest day's work to throw suspicion off of him."

Under the thick canopy of plum-laden bushes ran beaten trails of cattle and the neighborhood's free-ranging hogs, trails on which hoof-prints would not show. Harvey patiently followed them, however, one to its exit to the prairie, another to an open glade in the woods that was a favorite stamping ground for cattle, a third to a wood-trail. The fourth led to the creek bank, and at the edge of the water his searching

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eye was arrested. The narrow, sloping trail was damp for two feet or so, as though a cow had somewhat recently waded out. But he could see no fresh hoof-prints.

"Maybe," Harvey said to himself, "the plum picker slopped water up here to hide his tracks. . . . Let's see." He thought for a minute, and then waded into the water, turning to face the plum thicket. He studied the creek banks on either side, the fringing buck brush, patches of grass, overhanging trees. Where would Jack have turned his steps after wading into the stream?

Not twenty feet to the left, a distorted and rotting old elm leaned well out over the water, and the edge of a cavity in its trunk showed. As Harvey waded towards it, the opening visibly increased in size.

"I'll take a look at that 'possum den!" he decided. Below it, the water was hip deep, and he had to stand on tiptoe to look inside. His careful scrutiny showed him that the bottom of the cavity had recently been disturbed. Excited, he dug swiftly amongst the wood mold and animal refuse, found nothing and was about to turn away when a falling fragment of rotted wood caused him to raise his eyes. Overhead, almost beyond his reach and concealed except when he thrust his head far into the opening, the hollow was blocked by seemingly casually fallen twigs. Harvey reached up to tear at the obstruction; it came away, and an old coat fell down to the bottom of the cavity. Wrapped in the

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coat were two large packages of dollar bills, discarded wrappings from other packages of currency, and the calendar portion of the lithograph Harvey had taken from the Dines living room!

"Well, I'll be dinged!" Harvey exclaimed, removing all traces of his invasion and, with his find, waded out of the water on the opposite bank from the plum thicket. He went quickly back to camp where he changed his wet clothes, then rejoined his baling crew. After supper, he sneaked Vergil's shotgun out of the house, loaded with buckshot, and came back to announce that he was spending the night at his camp. Before daybreak, he had established himself in a carefully prepared post of observation across the creek from the old elm tree.

He had a long wait. Not until past ten o'clock did Jack Hayes appear and, after listening intently for five minutes, lay aside his sister's skirt and his own boots, trousers and underclothes to step into the water. He waded to the elm and raised his hands to the hiding place. As he did so, Harvey rose from his blind, not ten yards away, and called:

"Keep them hands up, Jack!"

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CHAPTER XVIII

A NEIGHBORHOOD "LITERARY"

THE news of Jack Hayes's capture by Harvey shocked and sickened Nan. She felt betrayed for the second time by some one she had liked and trusted. She told Susan Dines of Harvey's warning about Jack and cried:

"Was I to blame, Aunty, for not believing what he said?"

"Still," the old woman hesitated, "I wish you'd told me at the time. Maybe . . . but I ain't sure, Nancy, that I'd have believed Harvey, either. Jack Hayes always seemed like a straight young feller, except for the bootleggin', which he'd quit."

"I just feel as if I couldn't hold my head up again," Nan lamented. "I won't ever think of a man again." Susan Dines remained sympathetically silent. "Just to think of Jack robbing and killing! How could he bear to look folks in the face after that? It's awful!"

"Well now," said the old woman quietly, "maybe it ain't so easy to say what's white an' what's black out here on the prairie. 'Course, there ain't a shadow of excuse for what Jack Hayes an' that gang done up at Homeville. Not a shadow! Still, honey lamb, if you

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was older—about my age, say—maybe you could understand why Jack joined that Pat Dawson. . . .

"They say the devil gets into such men; seems to me it's just the men themselves tryin' to find somethin' to do that's dangerous an' gives 'em excitement. . . . Now, you take outlaw horses. They're just a mite too high-spirited, as a rule, an' that's all's the matter with 'em. Maybe it's the same with men."

Nan shook her head, and after a moment of tragic reflection she wailed again: "How can I ever hold my head up now?"

"Don't be a fool, Nancy!" Susan Dines spoke sharply. "Hold your head up? All you got to do is lift your chin! Let me tell you, you ain't the only girl around here that liked Jack Hayes. An' let me tell you somethin' else: you've got to go by what the law says—a man's innocent till he's proved guilty; an' there wasn't any reason why you shouldn't have been friends with Jack. . . . Now, take Ches; we don't hear folks condemnin' him—" The old woman pulled herself up sharply, and Nan cried:

"Yes, Aunty, but it just seems too bad—after Dad's trouble, and . . . and all. . . . Though, of course, Dad's case was different, and—"

"Every case is different from every other one, Nancy," the old woman cut in. "That's because men are different from one another. Same way with women. Look at Ruby Engel an' that Colbert girl, then take Myrtle Dunkin an' Jennie Stokes. Differ-

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ent? Of course they are. . . . Speakin' of men, there's Tom Winger. If he is what Sam Davis calls a lost soul, I wonder why Myrtle's goin' 'round with him!"

"Is she, Aunty?" Nan asked quickly.

"That's what I've heard," her aunt answered.

Jennie Stokes's animated account of Jack Hayes being marched out of the plum thicket by Harvey stirred Nan to an angry pity. As Vergil got it from Harvey and passed it on to Jennie, Jack went reluctantly, in rage and humiliation, clad in his sister's waist and sunbonnet. Glimpsing the procession from the window of her locked kitchen, Kate ran to the barn, mounted Jack's saddled sorrel and fled to warn "Buster." The two had not been seen since.

Jennie told Nan something that roused in her an admiration of Harvey; after matching the two fragments of the bank's lithograph, he decided to keep this evidence secret because its use at the trial would involve Nan. What Jennie did not know, for Harvey said nothing about it, was Hayes's remark when threatened with its production:

"You don't need to pull that picture in court; I'll take what's comin' to me without draggin' that girl into the case!"

Jack's trial created a great stir in the Thunder Creek and the Walnut Creek settlements. Harvey became something of a hero, but there were many who secretly pitied Jack, feeling that high spirits and love of ad-

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venture (two traits with which they had the keenest sympathy) rather than a real love of evil doing had pulled him down.

It was Harvey who brought Nan the news that Hayes had "got a plenty" from the Federal judge for his act: a sentence to life imprisonment. But it was Jennie, worried by Harvey's refusal to take the matter seriously, who reported the news that "Buster" Hayes had sent word from his hiding place by an Indian that he meant to "get" Harvey for the capture of Jack.

"An' 'Buster's' the kind that'll try to carry out a plan to get revenge," Jennie said. "One of them quiet fellows."

Late September had come. Hay cutting had ended three weeks before. Harvey Stokes had his baling crew at work on Thunder Creek and his new threshing machine was drawing farmer visitors east of Walnut Creek. Sam Davis had departed after tossing the last forkful of hay on the last of the Dines stacks. Nan and her uncle were making a leisurely job of fencing and protecting the stacks against fire, and the date of her father's second trial was approaching.

Out from Big Grove, with a shotgun in his buggy to bag a "mess" of fat young prairie chickens, drove Claude Kearns with a letter. Pulling up beside a stack, he came over to Nan and Dines.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he asked, after Nan had read aloud a laboriously written scrawl sent

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from a remote post office in southwestern Colorado:

. . . . . .

"Mister Kerns dere sir I have found the pistol. A Ute Indian thats livin here now named Jonnie was with a medicine show at Fort Tyler when Ches Forest killed that feller. He heard the two fellers quarrelin an seen Dick Brothers pull a gun on Ches Forest before Ches Forest drawed down on him an when Brothers was shot he fell an throwed the gun clear. Then Ches Forest run right past where Jonnie was hid an Jonnie got up an picked up the pistol. He was afraid to turn it in to the sherif for fear hed be arrested an locked up. You know how Indians is that way. I can bring Jonnie an the gun to Fort Tyler also affydavy from the man named Wildroot Stigler that run the show swearin the show was in Fort Tyler the day of the shootin. Rite an tell me what you want me to do. I been working on this for the sake of Ches Forests gal an I dont want anything to go wrong. No more at present from your friend Sam Davis."

. . . . . .

"I'd telegraph him to bring the Ute Indian and Stigler's affidavit if I thought the old man was responsible," Kearns observed. Billy Dines looked up from his attitude of careful listening to say:

"I'll bet old Sam has got something; I'd take a chance." And Nan pointed out:

"He doesn't say he was led to find the Indian in a vision, for fear you wouldn't pay any attention to the letter. But he'll sure tell us that later."

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"Of course," Kearns said gravely, "if what he writes is true, your father 'll be free within two weeks!"

Kearns sent the telegram; it was answered promptly; and the lawyer went down to Fort Tyler to await the Indian's coming and attend to the necessary legal preliminaries. Nan lived through a period of almost agonizing doubt alternating with hours of joyous anticipation. In the midst of her mental commotion, Harvey came to her with a proposal that pleased and heartened her.

"It's this way, Nan," he explained, "I've got my hands full with the balin' outfit an' the thresher. Vergil's sort of lookin' after the baler for me, but he's been elected to the Council an' him an' Jennie'll go off down to the timber for Council session in ten days. Your Dad's clever at handlin' machinery, an' when he comes up here I'd like him to take holt of my balin' outfit for me."

"Why, Harvey, that would be fine!" Nan beamed upon him. Harvey had another practical plan, inspired by Jennie Stokes, and before returning to the farm where he was threshing, outlined it in his slow, careful fashion:

"Vergil's goin' to try to get the Indians to locate schools up here, sort of go half an' half with the white folks in buildin' 'em an' payin' teachers. But we don't want to wait; an' it looks like when him an' Jennie leaves we could tear out a partition in our house an' fix up some benches an' desks an' hire a teacher an'

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have a school all started, like the one they've got up here on Walnut Creek. It would help Vergil in arguin' with them Councilors."

"Have you got a teacher?" Nan asked.

"No; Jennie wondered if you couldn't help."

"Oh, I couldn't do it. But I could ask Mr. O'Shea, at the Academy, to recommend somebody."

"Good," said Harvey, then: "Jennie was talkin' of somethin' else: she wants you to help her get up a Friday evenin' 'Literary' to sort of bring the folks together. Looks like if we intend to change the reputation of Thunder Creek from an outlaw hang-out, it's time we done somethin' like that."

Nan's quick nod of agreement was followed by the silent reflection:

"I like you for that, Harvey!" Quiet as he was, she thought, he was brave and resourceful, a good influence in the community. She agreed to help.

Nan and Jennie built a program; two songs, a recitation, a debate, a "paper." For refreshments there would be canned-oyster stew and pie. Then they set out to inform the selected entertainers and debaters of their fate, argue and plead with them, threaten them and win their consent.

By Friday evening, the Stokes house had been prepared; the partition removed, furniture cleared out, makeshift benches installed and a platform erected at one end of the long room. Nan spent the afternoon helping Jennie, Vergil and Harvey, and awaited with

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keen anticipation the arrival of the folks who would join in this effort to awaken neighborly coöperation.

When Abel Madden, with his Indian wife and four sons, ranging from eighteen-year-old Wes to six-year-old Boog, drove up, Vergil was jubilant.

"He's the old bell cow of this region," Vergil said of Abel. "You'll see the rest of 'em come trailin' in after him." And it was so. Abel's brother Abe and his wife arrived next, to sit grimly beside his brother. These two old-timers, their tumbled red hair plentifully sprinkled with gray and their red-lidded eyes squinting in the unaccustomed brilliancy of the light from four lamps spotted about the room, represented the old order, with its passing creed: "Less law an' more guts to stand up fer yerself!" Yet they had worked for Vergil's election and retained open minds concerning his school project.

Shrill-voiced, undersized "Dink" Moffett brought his brood of six; Ruby Engel came with her parents, with "Cherokee Bill" Ridge riding alongside the wagon on horseback; the Alberts accompanied Sadie and Henry Bear in the big Indian's farm wagon; Tom Winger and "Jumbo" Cox picked up old Motey Tiger and Joe—Motey, with his fiddle under his arm, riding Tom's Baldy horse—as Nan observed with a little tightening of the throat as she watched the arrivals from the kitchen window; Susan and Billy Dines helped to fill the Dunkin's wagon.

By half past eight every one likely to come was in-

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side, and Vergil, who had taken a seat beside the little platform close to Billy Dines, rose and called to Harvey:

"Say, Harve, hadn't we better go ahead with the rat killin'!" The silence that had fallen upon the room as he stood up was broken by a chuckle from old Abel Madden. Giggles from the youngsters followed. Harvey nodded his head at his brother, who grinned captivatingly over the crowd.

"Folks," he continued, "I guess we've got to go through with this program. My wife an' Miss Nancy Forest got it up, an' it's a dandy! After it's over, Jennie wants you all to have somethin' on her . . . I mean oyster stew an' pie." His grin broadened.

"As I was sayin', we got to get down to cases. The first number is a song by Miss Colbert, Motey Tiger playin' the fiddle. You'll—"

"Jumbo" Cox urged Tot forward with an encouraging smile and the audible advice, "shake the rafters, Gal!" The embarrassed girl went to stand beside the placid, shock-haired old full-blood and in a quavering soprano she sang "Peek-a-boo!" while the Indian watched her out of the corner of his eyes and improvised his accompaniment.

"Peek-a-boo! peek-a-boo!
I see you hi-ding th-e-e-e-e-re!"

The song ended, and the boys stamped, laughed, whistled loudly and called for more. Tot whispered to old

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man Tiger, who nodded, then broke into "Hear dem Bells!" to the subdued and joyous whooping of "Jumbo."

The tempest of approval past, Vergil rose to grin at Harvey.

"Before we have the debate, one of Thunder Creek's best entertainers will make you laugh. Come on, Harve!" Walking stolidly forward to the platform. Harvey faced round and in a strange rapid mumble, with eyes fixed obstinately on the floor, began:

"This iza nimitation uva a nigger preacher preachin on the text uva—uva—well, he sez t' the assembled brodern en sistern, 'Brodern en sistern,' he sez, 'ma text for de preachin dis evenin am'—he sez—" Harvey raised his head. His face was aflame, his eyes now trying desperately and unsuccessfully to cling to the ceiling as he stammered: " 'Ma text fer dis evenin am dis':" He gulped and accomplished it: " 'Whaeber de hen do scratch, dar am de bug also!' " He paused, terrified, and a great guffaw exploded before Joe Tiger could stuff a fist into his mouth. Crackling laughter ran about the room, ended in a burst that drove Harvey down from the platform stuttering:

"I g-g-guess I c-c-can't remember any more."

Vergil held up his hand, and when the last whimper had died consoled his brother:

"The rest ain't so funny, anyhow, Harve!

"Now we're goin' to show up another member of the family! The debate, folks, is on the subject, 'Re-

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solved that women have done more harm in the world than men.' Which, of course, they have! I'm on the affirmative of this question, an' I'm to open up, but the real arguin' for my side will be by Mrs. Alberts. For the negative, Miss Nancy Forest, trained at Big Grove Academy, an' Uncle Billy Dines will do the best they can to slander the male sex."

"I'm bettin' on the negative!" Tom Winger's impulsive challenge stabbed into Nan's consciousness, and she sat with downcast eyes as Vergil launched into verbal exaggerations and homely denunciation of Delilah, Cleopatra and Belle Starr—the last of whom he described as "the bandit queen of this very Indian country that has led more men along the road to ruin than Jesse James an' Cole Younger put together!" His argument ended, Vergil called upon Nan to come forward. She obeyed, and began falteringly:

"I think Vergil Stokes ought to be ashamed of himself to—"

"Now, will you be good, Vergil?" Ruby Engel chirped impertinently. Nan was steadied by the interruption, her pride roused. She continued:

"When my opponent names Cleopatra, I ask you to remember Cæsar, the world's biggest bully!"

"Where does he live at?" demanded "Jumbo" Cox in a truculent undertone, and Nan smiled at the audible answer from "Cherokee Bill" Ridge:

"Aw, he's done dead, long time ago!"

"I may say," Nan resumed her argument, "that all

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of the women my opponent has named are as dead as Cæsar. They have stopped doing harm—even Belle Starr, who died at the hands of her own son!"

"That's right, she sure did," muttered Abe Madden. "That white-livered young skunk sure killed her!"

Abel Madden rose to glare belligerently at his brother and growl:

"Say, you ain't puttin' in a good word fer that Starr woman, are ye? Why, dammit, I knowed Sam Starr, knowed him well, before ever that woman got a-holt of him, an' if ever a young feller was led to the devil—"

"Now, Uncle Abel"—Vergil the peacemaker arose—"let's hear what the regular debaters say, an' then I'll throw the question open to everybody. What do you say?"

"Sure," the old man agreed, "I apologize to the young lady, an' I wouldn't of said a word if Abe hadn't of shot off his mouth about that Starr woman."

"Well, dern your ol' hide, you know you can't stand up for what that boy of her'n done!" Abe retorted hotly before his brother sat down.

After Mrs. Alberts had stood for five minutes hesitantly repeating the one idea she had been able to muster—"women can be better than men, therefore they can be worse, accordin' to the way they're brought up"—and Billy Dines had supplied three minutes of unexpected denunciation of the Mormons, Vergil begged

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the Maddens to take the floor and continue their argument.

"I done said all I wanted to," Abe growled, and Abel shook his head.

"Who wins?" the cracked voice of "Dink" Moffett demanded.

"Dog-gone, we never did select no judges!" exclaimed Vergil. "Let's all vote, not includin' the debaters." But laughter drowned out the suggestion.

Joe Tiger and Motey gave their song, a rhythmic, low-pitched and penetrating chant used by the Shawnees at their "stomp dances," the old man accompanying it with teasing, insistent beating of the ancient drum. As the final number, Jennie read her "paper," items of intimate neighborhood gossip, two of which brought color to Nan's cheeks:

"Wonder why Nan Forest wants to learn all about balin' hay? Maybe Harve Stokes could tell."

"Myrtle Dunkin an' Tom Winger rode all the way from Dunkin Grove to Timber Hill last Saturday evenin' without sayin' a word. Why so bashful, Myrtle? Did the cat get your tongue, too, Tom?"

Winger flushed at this latter, resented its apparent inference. Myrtle meant nothing to him, and their occasional contacts had been more or less accidental. He wished that Nan had not heard Jennie's teasing comment.

Watching Nan throughout the evening, he resolved on another attempt to "make up" with her. As the

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program ended and new groups began forming, he moved through the crowd toward where she was standing beside Jennie Stokes, helping to count noses before bringing in bowls of oyster stew. But Ruby Engel had also been watching—both Nan and Tom. With her arm hooked firmly in the reluctant Myrtle's and with Bill Ridge in tow, she blocked his progress.

"Oh, hello, Tom." Ruby grinned maliciously. "Say, I bet you're starved! You take care of Myrtle while Bill an' me goes into the kitchen an' brings somethin' out." She left him anchored to Myrtle. Tom saw Harvey approach Nan and was near enough to hear him propose:

"I'll saddle Gray Dog after supper an' ride home with you?"

"All right, Harvey; I'll tell Aunty."

Desperate, Tom determined to speak. Muttering an excuse to Myrtle, he followed Nan and Jennie Stokes to the kitchen.

"Can't I help, Jennie?" he begged, flushing under the autumn oakleaf tan of his cheeks.

"Sure," Jennie agreed, "but don't try to carry more'n one bowl at a time!" She vanished from the kitchen with a loaded tray. Tom stepped in front of Nan as she attempted to follow.

"Nan," he pleaded swiftly, "won't you let *me* ride home with you?" The flash of color that swept her cheeks was Nan's only acknowledgment of Tom's power to stir her heart. She answered formally:

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"Thank you, Mr. Winger, but Harvey's taking me home."

"When can I see you, Nan?" he urged.

"You see me now, don't you?" she gibed.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" He spoke roughly, impatient of her simple fencing tactics. Nan's eyes flamed.

"Do you think Ruby would approve?" The sarcasm sprang involuntarily to her lips; it wasn't at all what she had meant to say.

Tom answered angrily:

"I don't give a damn what she thinks!"

"Oh!" Nan's perverse desire to hurt him drove her on. "Maybe you've stopped getting drunk, too, and making a show of yourself?"

"Say," he flared, coming close to her, "maybe you think I've been robbin' banks?" His face was gray, his grin ghastly, born of his hurt.

"Never speak to me again!" Nan cried, just as Jennie came back.

"I think we don't need you any more, Tom," Jennie said.

"I guess that's right," he agreed harshly, and walked out of the back door to mount his horse and ride furiously away, cursing himself as he rode for a blundering fool. A bitterness rose in his throat and his tongue seemed too thick for fluent expression of his misery.

The quarrel left Nan with a pounding heart, a feeling of frustration. Tom had been cruel, rough, had

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tried to dominate her; she would never think of him again. The breach between them was definite. She would not be humiliated and distressed by Tom Winger or any other man!

With a sense of relief and thankfulness, Nan started homeward with Harvey. The very fact that he lacked the allure, the quick, laughing charm of either Tom Winger or Jack Hayes, was in his favor. She felt cheated and betrayed by the type that had attracted her, as she now thought bitterly, so easily! Harvey was different. Silent, modest—and how fine of him to want to help her father make a fresh start, contrasted with Tom's selfish resentment because she had put her duty to help her dad ahead of the pleasure of going to a dance with him!

So she smiled on Harvey, soothed his hurt feelings over the fiasco he had made as an entertainer.

"I do think, Harvey," she said, "there are lots finer things for a man to be than just a smooth talker."

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CHAPTER XIX

THE HAYMAN'S LYRICAL MOMENT

IT was characteristic of Harvey Stokes that his great moment should come in late September. The first frosts had browned the grass and curled the ends of the blades, precipitated the first showers of hickory leaves in Thunder Creek bottom. Out on the broad stretches of cut-over prairie, dotted with multitudinous ricks like the tents of a vast army, prairie chickens perched on the widespread arms of bull-rakes, and mowing machines stood rusting. In the small creek bottom fields, corn stalks had turned from brilliant green to light gray and their pendent ears had hardened with the black-brown crisping of the silk.

A lop-sided moon rose in their faces as he and Nan rode in the wake of Will Dunkin's rattling wagon.

"I like September an' October. Don't you, Nan?" Harvey remarked abruptly.

"Especially? I don't know. Why, Harvey?" She was interested.

"Things seem kind of peaceful," he explained vaguely, sweeping an arm about. Nan caught his mood.

"That's so, isn't it? You don't hear the birds by day or the frogs by night." She laughed softly.

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"Only the crickets in the grass. . . . And things have stopped growing—not that *they're* noisy!"

"It's harvest time, Nan. I guess that's why I like it. Did you ever think of the millions of people that live because days like these come, when things ripen—"

"Millions that would starve," Nan interrupted, "unless we gathered and baled and shipped. Yes, I've thought of it; but what makes you speak of it now?"

"Well, I was wonderin' to-night if I was any use in the world. I'm dumb an' awkward; can't dance an' don't fly around with the young folks an' mix up with people like Vergil does or that Winger fellow." He paused, and Nan remained silent. "I got to thinkin' I was an old stick-in-the-mud, wonderin' what I *was* good for. The best I could make out for myself, an' I guess you'll laugh at me, Nan, was that I help to gather the harvest—even if it's mostly only the hay harvest."

Nan's quick response was heartening, thrilling; it waked in him the sense of his importance in the web of life that was unrolling under their eyes.

"Oh, Harvey," she cried, "what a lot that is! You help feed the cattle and the horses of those who feed the world—all of the millions that work and play and dance and make laws. Seems like a lot to me."

Harvey shoved his hat back on his head, and faced the moonlight with an expanding smile as he went on:

"Girls don't generally understand my ideas, an' I

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can't talk to 'em. I guess they don't care about what I'm interested in. But you, Nan, I get along fine with you."

"But I care about most things, Harvey," Nan responded and laughed. "Dancing and having a good time as well as work and harvests."

"Yes, sure." Harvey echoed her laughter. "I know, but—you see how tongue-tied I am! Seems like you're the only girl I know that takes an interest in the things I've got all wrapped up in."

"Maybe it's because I've had to," Nan mused, thinking of her father. "I do love to see hay put into stacks, corn into cribs, and wheat—" she broke off suddenly to ask—"How much longer will you run your threshing machine?"

"Six or seven weeks, I sh'd think. Did you write to your Dad?"

"Yes." For some minutes Nan rode silent through the cool, pale moonlighted night, listening to the incessant chirring of the crickets in the rank dead grass beside the road, then: "Harvey, if you're right about Dad an' he can take charge of your baling outfit, it will be the best thing in the world for him. Keep him busy, get him interested."

"Yes. I been thinkin', Nan," Harvey was considering his words with care, "maybe some day your Dad an' me might be partners. 'Course," he hedged, "you can't tell now, but you got to look ahead."

"Partners!" Nan cried, and rode her Dolly mare

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close to Harvey's big gray in order to smile eagerly into his face. "Oh, Harvey, how splendid for Dad!"

"Nan, I've thought furder'n that, too." He leaned toward her from his superior height as he stumbled on: "I mean your Dad—well, he might be the partner for me—can't be certain. But now, you! Nan, I know you *could* be."

"I!" She knew what he meant, but added defensively, half frightened, "your partner?"

"Nan, don't you see what I mean?" Harvey's voice was hoarse with the strain of his anxiety, and, yielding to an uncalculated impulse of courage, he leaned to place an arm about her shoulders.

His touch, the leaning bulk of him, the underflow of passion that had charged his words, something of the eloquence of the inarticulate in him combined to thrill Nan. She lifted a hand to clasp the great paw-like one trembling on her shoulder, and he broke out:

"Ah, Nan, I love you so! I can't tell you. It just seems like I'm boilin' all inside; an' thinkin' about you —thinkin' about you." He became lost in the fog of his sensations.

"Why, Harvey, I didn't know you cared for me like that."

"It's so, Nan; I think about you all the time." His powerful, blunt fingers clutched Nan's smaller hand. "It's got so I hate to see you talkin' to anybody else. . . . It nearly makes me sick to think of somebody

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else bein'—lovin' you. Don't you see, Nan?" His fingers hurt her hand as he pressed her close against his leaning shoulder.

Nan was confused, moved, deeply stirred. The sincerity of the man's passion had its effect, so, less clearly to her conscious mind, did the thought that here was help for her father and a sure anchorage for herself. It seemed to her that she must love Harvey because she admired and trusted him, and yet something deep inside held her back.

"I do like you, Harvey, but—why, I'm not seventeen yet."

It seemed an inadequate rendering of what she felt, but Harvey appeared to understand and his voice was gentle as he said:

"I know, Nan." They rode on without speaking for some time. "I can wait. . . . An' I want to say, what I said a little while ago just seemed to come over me like a hot wind, an' seemed like I had to tell you. . . . Nights like this in the fall, when it seems like God—oh, I don't know, somethin' seems to be goin' on like the carryin' out of promises. . . . An' I love you so much, Nan, it just seems like I've got to tell you. . . . I don't know—" He sighed at the hopelessness of attempting to pour out his heart to her.

"You keep fillin' my mind, Nan, an' I just had to say what I did. Maybe you could make the promise now, Nan, an' I could wait—"

Around and around he pursued the thought, blindly,

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but yet effectively, like a negro field singer absorbed in the rehearsal of the Lord's promise of salvation.

The crude insistence of Harvey's plea, its passionate sincerity, overwhelmed Nan. She was too young to understand her own lack of passion. And the sore spot left by Tom's cruelty needed a medicine, though this, too, she did not comprehend. Love for Harvey would never overwhelm her like a sweet flood, render her incoherent as he had become. But he *was* strong, masterful in his dumb fashion—and he meant so much now to her father: the opportunity to make good, to accomplish what would surely be, this time, a regeneration! And she could not doubt the single-heartedness of his love for her. Yes, there must be rich gold in this great lump called Harvey!

As the two arrived at the Dines gate, she put out her hand and took Harvey's, pressed it to her cheek and said in a shy, small voice—yet with an odd sinking of the heart:

"I think I'll promise what you want."

She slipped off her horse as Billy Dines came to the door, with a hurried "good night, Harvey," avoiding his downstretched arms.

Susan Dines had a wonderful Saturday, excited all the morning over Nan's confession of her engagement to Harvey and bursting into jubilant song when Billy brought back from Big Grove in the afternoon a telegram from Kearns:

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"Tell Nancy her dad is free and sends love. He can't come home just now, but is writing. Heartiest congratulations."

Nan danced around her aunt with shining eyes.

"But he'll come soon, won't he, Aunty?" she cried. "When he hears about Harvey and me, and what Harvey means to do for him?" The two savored their happiness for a time, and then a shadow of doubt crept into the old woman's eyes.

"I guess," she observed at length, "that Mrs. Ellery's seen a good deal of your pa."

"Yes," Nan answered innocently. "I was so glad she liked him."

"Huh!" Susan Dines dropped the subject.

Sam Davis, who returned from Texas with Kearns, brought Chester Forest's letter to Nan and Susan Dines. In it he explained that he planned to join the Southern Gleaners, work for the order for a few months in Texas and qualify as an organizer before coming back to the long grass country. He would establish the order at Big Grove, and from there help to spread it. Nan's first disappointment was emphasized by Sam Davis's pessimistic prophecy:

"Your dad'll never come back to the farm. You mark my words!"

"You just wait till he hears from me," Nan challenged. She recovered her faith and went happily about her work with Billy Dines.

In the long letter she sent to her father, Nan wrote:

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"It's so splendid, Dad, that you and Harvey and I are to be partners! Harvey wants you to help him, and I'm so happy about it. . . .

"Maybe you don't remember Harvey? He's getting to be one of the well-known men in this part of the country. He's just under thirty, very strong; broad shouldered, though not tall. He's naturally fair skinned, with light hair and bluish gray eyes. . . . He isn't much of a talker—he says if he's anything he's a doer; and I like that in him. . . .

"I don't think he has ever thought about a girl before, I mean in the way he does about me. I just seem to fill every minute of his thoughts, and he says he'll be jealous of every young man that speaks to me. So you see, Dad, what a life I'll lead! I know you'll like him, too, and the three of us will make a fine team."

The letter spun itself out, told how she enjoyed being an engaged girl, reiterated her delight in the fact that now she could make a real home for her father. But though she did not realize it, the letter lacked the joyous, bubbling sense of happiness it should have shown.

Reading it to Julia Ellery, Ches Forest expressed his disappointment:

"It sure don't sound just right, somehow."

"'*Doesn't*,' Chester. May I see it?" Mrs. Ellery read the letter, pondered over it a moment, then said:

"Probably Nan inherited a great deal of self-control and practical wisdom from her mother?"

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"Yes," Forest admitted, "Clara was practical." He took the letter to study it again, shook his head and went on.: "But there wasn't ever any doubt about one thing: she loved me!"

Julia Ellery noted the tone, the fierce little flame of ardor that had been lighted in his eyes by the memory of his wife, the tide of red mounting to cheeks that were filling and gaining sun stain.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that, Chester." She leaned from her seat in the low rocker to press his hand sympathetically. Through her mind ran the thought: "If ever a man was made to lean on a capable woman, it's he."

"Let me tell you what I read in this letter," she comforted. "I read in it a young girl's shyness in writing of her lover, and exaggerated worry over you, my dear. I think you can make your mind easy about her love for her Harvey; Nancy has too much of your own fine judgment of human values to make a mistake about the man she gives her heart to!" And she smiled, a warm, friendly smile.

Forest's answer to Nan's letter was full of affectionate response, but it was less frank than her own. For it held an implied promise which he knew would not be kept:

"You'll see me up there some of these days, an' we can all have a talk about that partnership proposition. . . . Yes, I'm supposed to be a good hand with machinery."

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CHAPTER XX

BEING ENGAGED

HAPPY in the conviction that her marriage with Harvey would be the best possible solution of her and her father's difficulties, Nan gave whole-hearted sympathy to her lover's problems. He proposed to put Fred Gifford in charge of the baling crew when Vergil left for Council session, and prophesied:

"Next year, with your pa to run the hayin' an' balin' outfit, I'll work that threshing machine right through from wheat cuttin' to the end of October. I figure there'll be a big acreage of wheat, an' I can get most of the farmers to stack, so's I can go right from threshin' from the shock to the stacks."

"Why don't they raise oats, too?" Nan asked.

"Wheat's a good cash crop," Harvey explained. "Like corn. These farmers think of oats as feed, and figure they don't need any feed, only corn an' hay. But they'll get around to it. Your uncle an' Fritz Engel are showin' the way, an' more farmers 'll sow oats next spring.

"Trouble is, Nan," Harvey went on, "we ain't gettin' enough real farmers into this country, an' we won't till they can buy land, instead of leasin' from the Indians."

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"Cattle and hay seem to satisfy most of us now," Nan observed. "I like the combination, too. They call for hard work over short stretches, and leave us a lot of spare time to range the prairie, get acquainted and have a good time with each other."

"You like gaddin' around, don't you?" Harvey demanded jealously.

"Why, sure!" laughed Nan. "I think this prairie country is just about the friendliest place in the world. It seems to call you out, as it does the cattle, and as it used to call the buffalo, to a sort of picnic. 'Come on, folks,' the prairie says, 'there's enough for all!' "

Harvey looked at Nan curiously, speculatively. He didn't understand that sort of talk, and he didn't like what he couldn't understand. But—"Shucks," he thought, "it's girl foolishness. She'll get over it when she's married, with all the work there is to do right at home."

For Nan, this autumn was a period of release, of enjoyment. No more worry about her father, no more school (but time for fruitful reading under the lamplight during those evenings when she was not off with Harvey to dances and parties or sitting with him before the wood fire in the Dines fireplace). Time, too, for all-day excursions, after pecans and hickory nuts, and once Harvey took her on a five-day hunting trip to the hills south of the Spavinaw with the Dunkins and Sadie and Henry Bear, when they camped under the pines and the men spent the days ranging the flinty breaks and

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rugged slopes for deer. The same group rode to the harvest feast and dance of the Shawnee Indians, watched the all-night revelry beside the flaming bonfires under spreading oaks, listened to the low-voiced chanting, mingled with the numerous company of curious white visitors that edged the dancing circle of Shawnees and got to bed as a crisp October dawn was breaking over the world.

Best of all, were the Friday evening "Literaries." With Susan Dines, Nan would drive to the Stokes home, which was being looked after by the Moffetts, since Jennie and Vergil had moved down to the tribal capital, prepare the big room for the meeting, assist Bessie Blodgett, the new school teacher, whom O'Shea had recommended and who boarded with the Moffetts, in putting through the varied program and serving the refreshments. Both school and "Literary" thrived, and Abel Madden was urging his neighbors to go ahead with the school building project without waiting for Vergil to secure help from the tribal government.

One sparkling day when Harvey was busy at his haybaler, she rode with Billy Dines to a coyote hunt among the limestone breaks west of Little Walnut Creek. She followed for a while, in high excitement, the swift flight of the coursing greyhounds. But Bess's Dolly could not hold the pace, and Nan was obliged to pull up on a jutting point of rocks to watch the dozen better-mounted riders close in on the struggling pack, to listen to the pistol shots and yells of the hunters. She saw

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"Jumbo" Cox run down one of the tired, dirty-gray beasts, toss a rope about its body and drag it, snarling and biting at the rope, to a horrid death. She didn't like "Jumbo."

"Cherokee Bill" Ridge rode up with Paul Dunkin to talk with her and Uncle Billy after the hunt. Bill told of Gabe Horner's developing plans for "staking" him and Tom Winger to a thousand head of steers in the spring.

"We goin' to fix up a new ranch right down there." He pointed to a thin arrow of young timber bordering a draw that fell away from the bluff on which their horses stood. "Tom, he's goin' to stay with the G. H. cattle an' I'm goin' to be foreman of the W-R outfit!" Bill added this proudly, receiving their congratulations with a grin.

As the news of her engagement spread about, Nan found that nearly every one had a good word for Harvey. They called him a good worker, said he was a man you could depend on. Henry Day, of The Big Store at Big Grove, who had an informal banking business amongst thrifty Indians, cattlemen, haymen and farmers, when he congratulated Nan, added impressively:

"Harvey'll be a rich man some day if he keeps on the way he's goin'!"

Nan liked this general approval, liked the importance and the excitement of being engaged. Harvey was not demonstrative, and the love-making between them was

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shy and restrained; and yet there were times when Nan felt terrified at the prospect of marriage.

Her aunt surprised her in one of these moments on a day when Harvey had been called away to Kansas City for a week and before going had taken her in his arms to offer vehement caresses, leaving her frightened and dismayed. When he had gone, she sat staring out of the window, her hands twisted in her lap, her face haunted by an unnamed fear. Susan Dines's entry and a casual question broke down her restraint and she burst into tears.

"Why, Nancy, what is it?" the old woman asked, hurrying to put affectionate arms about the girl.

"Oh, Aunty, I don't know—I—I'm afraid sometimes; sometimes Harvey scares me." She buried her face in her aunt's shoulder, clung to her.

"Well, now, honey lamb, of course you are. What girl wouldn't be? Thinkin' of marriage, wasn't you; that it won't be the same as sweetheartin'? But Harvey's a good man an' he loves you. You've got to remember that, times when you think maybe he's a brute an' don't understand you an' you wish you was back here in your own little room. . . . But, Nancy, life means changes, destroyin' an' buildin', growin' an' dyin', never satisfied with what's done to-day. As long's you both love each other things won't be hard. There's a lot of fool talk about the hardships of marriage for the woman, but if it's the right kind of match it leads to a wonderful kind of happiness that's so fine

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it just makes you ache. Only when it ain't right—well, you read about terrible things, women bein' beaten by men, women an' men bein' shot by jealous husbands an' wives, wives runnin' off with other men, husbands leavin' their wives. That's love an' marriage turned sour. . . . The great thing is to be friends after you're married, real friends, able to give an' take an' get along with one another day in an' day out. . . ."

Nan was comforted.

"Harvey is good, isn't he, Aunty! And I mean to be a good wife, and make a nice home for him—and Dad. It's fine that he wants to have Dad with us! We three 'll be the best partners ever." She smiled. "I want Harvey and me to be like you and Uncle Billy, happy and sweet, helping to build up the country."

"You will, Nancy, never fear; an' you'll find more in marriage as you go on with it. . . . An', then, honey lamb, maybe there'll be babies, children for you both to love, an'. . . ."

There were tears in their eyes as they kissed.

Gradually, as the weeks passed, Harvey's attitude toward Nan began to change. The anxious suitor became the complacent ruler. He demanded full accounts of her plans, her thoughts, her every act. He asked endless clumsy questions about her friendships with the brothers of her girl friends, Paul Dunkin, Nat Ross, Charley Thompson, Stan McClellan. He wanted

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to be told all about the quarrel with Ruby Engel. Of Tom, however, he never spoke.

At first Nan was flattered by his absorption, his jealous guardianship; it seemed a proof of his treasuring love. But she began to chafe under it. Harvey seemed to be trying to contract her circle of friends, to restrict her interests, to reproach her for any thought not directly concerned with himself.

However, she consoled herself with the conviction that he would "get over being silly" after they were married; and the belief that her beloved father would be with them, that he would have congenial work with Harvey, that the three would toil helpfully together, sustained her in moments of doubt more than she realized.

Always practical, Harvey urged a wedding early in March; he wanted to make certain changes in his house, which he had bought from Vergil.

"An' we'll go to Kansas City for our weddin' trip, Nan," Harvey said. "I want to go up an' take delivery of some hayin' machinery, anyway, an' it'll fit in just right."

Nan consented, and began thinking of her own preparations.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE DEEPENING SHADOW

ONE morning, "Jumbo" Cox appeared at the Dines gate leading a young, trim-bodied mare, curried to a shining gloss and outfitted with a silver-studded side-saddle, a flat-plaited halter, a silver-decorated bridle, a hair stake rope and with a beautiful little quirt hanging from the upright horn of the saddle.

"What a beauty, Jumbo!" she exclaimed, as the cowboy, dismounting, came toward her leading the mare.

"She's yourn now, Nan." He handed over the reins, grinned at her bewilderment and added: "She's a present from Gabe, an' her name's Chiquita. Here, they's a letter that goes with her." Cox gave her Horner's note of cordial good wishes.

Nan was surprised and touched by the cattleman's remembrance, and wild with delight over Chiquita. She read Horner's note to Susan Dines and her uncle, who both admired the mare. Dines remembered, with an unspoken tribute to the generosity of the cattleman, Horner's remark:

"Nan an' Tom 'd sure make a grand pair!"

Harvey came to supper, was shown Chiquita, ap-

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praised her casually as "a little light for farm work" and, in the gathering dusk, walked with Nan to her father's farm. Standing beside the rebuilt corn crib, he seized her unexpectedly and sought her lips with his in one of his fierce betrayals of passion. Startled, she twisted her head away almost angrily. Then she put her arms about his neck, offering her lips as she whispered:

"I'm sorry, Harvey; but you frightened me."

Harvey stood in uncomfortable silence for a time, watching the prairie turn from gray to black, then:

"What you goin' to do with two side-saddles, Nan?" Thus obliquely he approached the subject of Gabe Horner's gift.

"I thought I'd give the one Aunt Susan bought for me to Mrs. Alberts. Hers is worn out, and she loves to ride."

"I was wonderin' if you hadn't sort of got used to the old one; maybe you'd want to sell the new one."

"Sell it! No, I love it, so shiny and gay with its silver trimmings and stamped patterns." Her enthusiastic answer silenced Harvey for a time. He returned to the attack:

"Have you rode that little bald-faced mare yet?"

"This afternoon; and, Harvey, Chiquita's a pacer!"

"You goin' to keep Dolly?"

"Oh, yes; she's one of Uncle Billy's presents, and I love her."

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"Did I understand this Chiquita's a sister of that horse you used to ride when you were goin' around with—" The question trailed off.

"Tom's Baldy? Yes, a full sister."

"Old man Horner sure did take to you, Nan, right from the start. I don't know that I won't be jealous of him."

"Why, Harvey!" Nan laughed softly.

"Well," in awkward raillery, "sendin' a mount all the way up from Texas that way!"

"Only the saddle and the other trappings," Nan corrected. "Chiquita was shipped up last year. Tom's been using her mother for a bell mare."

"I expect he broke an' gaited the filly, too?" A note of harshness had crept into Harvey's voice.

"Why, I suppose he did."

"Maybe he put it into Gabe Horner's head to give the filly to you?" There was no mistaking the angry jealousy in his whisper now.

"Harvey!" Nan raised her head, startled. "That's a mean thing to say, and you know it."

Her protest was immediate, indignant. Stubbornly, Harvey maintained silence, eyes averted, while Nan's astonishment grew. What did he mean by that question, that tone? Was he jealous of Tom, suspicious? Suppose Gabe Horner had asked Tom's advice and Tom *had* suggested—she wondered if she could make Harvey understand the utter innocence and reasonableness of her view.

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"I guess I'm awful jealous, Nan," he whispered hesitantly.

She took his hand and brought it to her cheek.

"You mustn't be jealous of me," she begged. "It hurts."

He did not answer and, though Nan let him draw her close, there was a shadow on her spirit.

Unannounced, Ches Forest arrived next day. Nan heard the rattle of buggy wheels, looked out and cried, "There's Dad!" She rushed to the gate, where her father was assisting Julia Ellery to alight. With only a smile to Mrs. Ellery, she threw herself into her father's arms.

"Oh, Dad!" He laid a flushed cheek against the rich mass of her piled hair, held her close.

"Well, Nancy! Well, well, my Nancy! . . . My gracious, you've got to be a big girl!" Presently he held her off and, in obvious confusion, stammered:

"Nancy, Julia an' me—well, we got m—, got ahead of you—we got married yesterday—th—thought we'd stop off on the way to Kansas City an' say—" He ceased, looking anxiously at his daughter, as if fearful of her censure.

Nan's eyes came to rest on the beaming face of Forest's wife, and a weight seemed to crush her chest. A lump rose in her throat that prevented her from speaking.

"Oh!" she managed to get out at length, and gave her hand to Julia.

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Susan Dines came forward to embrace her brother and, with excited interest, take charge of the new Mrs. Forest. Nan wanted to get away, to be alone until she could control herself, conquer the feeling of keen disappointment, command her tears.

"It's fine having Dad happy!" she repeated over and over to herself, not daring to let herself think, "how will I get along without him?"

Next day Harvey drove over to meet Julia Forest and better his acquaintance with Nan's father. He was in a new sidebar buggy, drawn by a span of matched grays. Proudly he displayed the outfit, telling Billy Dines and Forest that it was to be his wedding present to Nan. Forest was tactless enough to remark:

"You'll get a lot of hard usage out of that rig, Mr. Stokes."

"Ain't you goin' to call me Harvey?" its owner asked, ignoring Forest's comment.

When Ches inspected Chiquita and the trappings that Gabe Horner had sent with the mare, he exclaimed:

"Now that's the jim-dandy outfit for Nancy!"

Billy Dines noted the contrasting reactions with some uneasiness. Listening to Forest's voluble talk about his wonderful wife, his fine prospects in the fraternal insurance business, he told him:

"Nancy's been countin' a lot on havin' you with her, Ches, an' I know she'll be terrible disappointed at losin' you."

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"Maybe not." Forest turned a disturbed face toward his brother-in-law. "Maybe she'd rather have Harvey to herself." But he spoke without conviction, for frankly he didn't "take to" the man Nan was to marry.

After Harvey had gone and Nan was alone in her room, she sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, staring out of the window, feeling strangely numb. She had counted so entirely on her father's need of her that she had failed to realize her need of him. She had never read between the lines of her father's letters the indications of his purpose which Susan Dines had suspected and Sam Davis had hinted; the possibility of the marriage had never occurred to her, and the shock of it was overwhelming. Now she was struggling with a forlorn conviction that in some way she had been cheated.

Her father and Julia went on to Kansas City, and Nan's mind was more than ever occupied with thoughts of the future. Her father was irrevocably lost to her. With immense pride the new stepmother had told Nan, in the intimate and affectionate talk they had, that Ches was making good as a worker for the Southern Gleaners.

Dad was all right; how about Harvey and herself?

Nan was conscious of the welling energy within her, knew that she wanted a full and busy life. Could she find it in Harvey's home, his business, helping him to grow? What of the community, its demands and op-

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portunities for service, its fun and companionship? What about—

"Maybe there'll be babies," Aunt Susan had said. A baby to lavish her heart on, to nourish from her breast! With a warm uprush of tenderness, she thought Harvey would like children. Perhaps they would have five or six, a joyous houseful for Dad to come and visit and play with. And Julia could help solve problems of dress and schooling. . . .

Yes, she was committed to the prairie and its absorbing problems. Vaguely she wondered who would take the place she had meant to fill in the college of elocution at St. Louis. . . . Years from now, perhaps, one of her own children would go—a girl who wouldn't care, as she did, for what the long grass country stood for: its prose of hay, cattle, corn and wheat, and its poetry of flying summer winds and furious rainstorms, winter flurries of sleet, stinging the face and setting the blood to racing through the veins, the caress of the spring sun that roused new life and brought an intoxicating jumble of song and flashing wings and far-flung carpets of green over the hills, and scattering herds. . . .

Harvey bought a light spring wagon and suggested that Nan should have Dolly and Chiquita broken to harness so that she might have a "roustabout outfit" for quick trips to Big Grove for repairs and supplies. With him she planned a cook wagon for his haying crew—a time-saving contraption of which he was proud.

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A multitude of new plans were being made: Tom Winger and Bill Ridge would receive their herd in March and put the steers on Billy Dines's feed ground until they could live off the new grass; more steers for Horner and "Sofkey" Horseford were to come and be fed in the breaks of Little Walnut Creek; and Joe Tiger announced that he was to become a cattleman, with fifteen hundred head of freshly branded longhorns in charge of a newcomer, Jim Lawton, and two of his Texas cowboys.

The vast, apparently boundless prairie invited exploitation. Here were generous prizes for cattlemen, haymen and farmers—plenty for everybody and to spare. As yet there could be no quarrel amongst them, though in a very few years—three, five, perhaps ten—the serious battle for the wild harvest would be fought; and, as always on the frontiers, the hard-handed men in blue overalls who drove sagging-bellied mares to nondescript plows would win.

Meanwhile, as a shipping point and trading center, Big Grove flourished. Hurried, businesslike farmers and haymen, their clothes spotted with grease and their hatbands sweat-stained and dusty, held street corner confabs with neat, slouching, keen-eyed cattle owners. The familiar, slow-moving, slow-speaking sidewalk groups of round-faced Indians, old men with dangling thick braids of hair that hung down across their chests, broad black hats, red shirts and yellow trousers, the women wearing bright shawls draped over heads and

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shoulders and voluminous calico skirts, with shy children dodging about them, became submerged in the press of the stranger people.

Occasionally, a Big Grove evening was rendered lurid by charging cowboys, drunk on bootleg whisky. Their shrill whoops brought Hank Redbird, the town's half-breed peace officer, on the run, eager to demonstrate his boast that he was "the wildest wildcat that ever growed up on the wild fork of Wild Cat Creek!" Editor Wills printed a piece in the *Eagle* calling upon all of the town's good citizens to back up their valiant peace officer to the limit. It was inspired by the killing of one of MacLaren's cowboys and the threat of the victim's friends to ride in and "get" Hank.

Deciding to establish a Big Grove base, Gabe Horner had built a wide-verandaed, two-story house at the edge of town. He set it on the crest of a gentle roll of prairie half a mile from the railroad, painted it white, put out maple trees and added a commodious red-painted horse barn at the back. His friend, "Sandy" MacLaren, also built near by. The two Texans went to Henry Day of the Big Store with the proposal to turn his informal deposit and money-lending business into a regular bank. By early October the project had advanced to the point where Wills printed a list of directors that was representative of all the community's interests: Day, Horner, MacLaren, Ross Murray, liberal candidate for chief; Leclaire, the railroad's live-stock agent at Big Grove; Claude Kearns,

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young Dr. Hardwick, Chief Littlespring, Billy Dines, Wills himself, and Harvey Stokes. When Harvey told Nan that he had been invited to the bank's board, she was radiant.

"That's splendid! Uncle Billy, too. I'm proud of you both!"

Before the new bank opened, Gabe Horner withdrew from the group of organizers, asking that Tom Winger be substituted. He explained:

"I have to spend too much of my time in Texas to keep track of the bank's doin's up here; an' Tom, he's a level-headed fellow that has a stake in this country an' more friends here than I have."

Thus it happened that at the banquet in the dining room of the new Hobbs House, held to celebrate the formal opening of the bank, Harvey and Tom Winger sat at the same table. After the businesslike speech of Henry Day, who was elected president, the decorated language of Leclaire and the brief, embarrassed talks of the other directors, Tom found himself beside Harvey at the tie-rack, where they had left their horses. Before mounting, he inquired casually:

"How are your folks, Harve?"

"All right." The reply was brusque.

"Remember me to Nan when you see her," Tom added.

"Be damned if I do!"

Winger ignored the surly response, but as he spurred his horse down the dirt street and on to G. H. ranch

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headquarters, he felt a mounting anger against the man Nan was to marry.

"Hell of a life she'll have with him," he muttered. "I'm sorry for Nan!" His thoughts turned again to Harvey.

"He'd ought to be a winner, like everybody thinks he will be, with Nan to help him, too; but there's somethin' wrong. . . . He ain't friendly enough; don't know how to be, I reckon. . . . Thinks too much about his own success an' what's his an' not enough about how his neighbors get along. . . . He'll be buildin' a wall around himself an' Nan, too; an' she as gay and friendly as the birds in spring! . . . It's a damned shame!"

Two days after the bank meeting, Fred Gifford, in charge of Harvey's haying crew, moved to the edge of the W-R range to bale out the hay previously stacked there. Winger proposed to buy five hundred tons for early spring feeding; he spoke to Nan of the offer, and she went to discuss it with Harvey. At her appearance, he came down from the platform of the separator where he had been feeding bundles of wheat into the cylinders, a harried, sweat-stained and chaff-dusted figure, listening impatiently against the sounds made by the pulsing engine, the flapping driving belt and the screaming cylinders. Nan, standing close, began brushing the dust from his shirt; irritably, he protested:

"Don't do that."

"Gracious, Harvey, don't be cross," she smiled.

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"Well, I'll get all mussed up again," he said lamely.

"It's near quitting time, Harvey," Nan said, and proposed: "Come to supper and stay over night at Uncle Billy's. It'll be a rest for you, and I'll drive you back early in the morning."

He consented. As they drove away, Harvey said abruptly:

"Nan, you understand I don't like you seein' that fellow Winger! I don't want you to see him—will you promise me that?"

"But that's foolish," she protested. "You don't want me to promise anything of the sort."

"That fellow'd better keep away," Harvey persisted. "I tell you—" his complaint became a sullen monologue, ending with: "I've got a good mind not to let them fellows have that hay."

"Just as you say," Nan agreed. "If you like, I'll tell Gifford."

"No," he said, after a prolonged silence, "they're offerin' a fair price. . . . An', Nan, I don't mean you'd do anything you'd oughtn't, like seein' that fellow behind my back; still, you know how I feel. . . . I guess I ain't got no right to be jealous, but—"

Nan heard his incoherent explanations in silence. She understood his feeling toward Tom, but he ought to know her well enough not to make silly and impossible demands upon her. If he didn't trust her, how were they to get along together?

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And it wasn't Tom only of whom he had become jealous—more and more, he was becoming resentful of any of her interests outside his own narrow circle. He had even complained because she had given some time to helping on the new schoolhouse, so that it might be ready for use by Thanksgiving.

With the dawn, she drove Harvey back to his threshing job. He seemed to have forgotten his mood of the night before, and talked at length of his probable summer profits. Exultantly, he remarked:

"This is sure the country for a hustler! No limit to what a fellow can make here if he knows how an' he's willin' to work."

Nan found "Cherokee Bill" Ridge waiting for her on her return.

"Nan," he said seriously, after greeting her, "I want to tell you somethin' about that 'Buster' Hayes—then you tell Harve. There was a fellow come to our dugout las' night from the Osage country. Out there he run across 'Buster,' an' 'Buster' told this fellow he was just waitin' to get the man that caught Jack. This fellow says 'Buster' means them words, too, an' he's apt to turn up here most any day now. Harve, he ought to watch out!"

"Oh, Bill, do you really think—but of course; and I'm much obliged to you. I wish Harvey'd never got mixed up in that business. He won't believe there's any danger; why, he just laughed when he first heard

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'Buster' had threatened him. But I'll see Harvey this evening and tell him, anyway."

"Well," Bill said cheerfully, "maybe 'Buster' won't come; maybe it's just talk. But Harve better watch out, I think, till that fellow gets caught or somebody kills him; an' that's liable to happen any day the way he's doin' now!"

When Nan, anxious, told Harvey, he laughed again.

" 'Buster' shoot me?" he scoffed. "He ain't got the nerve!"

And Nan could not make him see that he was in danger.

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CHAPTER XXII

THE TRAIL OF "BUSTER" HAYES

SLIPPING away from a wagon camp on Little Walnut Creek at dusk of a day in late October, Kate Hayes waited at the Engel barn for a chance to talk with Ruby. It came when Ruby returned from a ride with "Jumbo" Cox.

"Hello, Ruby!" Kate called softly, as the girl turned her pony loose in the corral.

"Gee, you scared me, Kate!" Ruby cried. "Say, what's up? Where'd you come from?"

"Listen!" Kate came close to whisper. "I want a talk with you; my horse is back there behind the barn—can you come with me? I'm camped down by the creek with some folks from Missouri."

Eager for news of what Kate had been doing since Jack's capture and her flight with "Buster," Ruby quickly resaddled and the two rode quietly off. Kate reported that she had been living with an uncle in Missouri and was now on her way to the Osage country with a man and his wife who were going out to join their son, a ranch foreman. Presently, Ruby remarked:

"They was awful hard on Jack, wasn't they!"

"Yes. Old Judge Pease sent him to Joliet—for life." Kate's tone was flat, bitter.

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"Where's 'Buster'?"

But Kate shook her head and, in silence, led the way to the camp, and the two dismounted.

"We can talk here all right," Kate said. "I want you to tell me all the news of the folks around here; what about Nan Forest an' that man she's goin' to marry?"

Ruby talked, pouring out the story of Nan's preparations for her marriage, her increasing activities and Harvey's growing importance in the community. Kate gripped her arm, questioning briefly, commenting bitterly. The drift of Kate's queries was soon evident to Ruby; she wanted detailed information as to Harvey's habits. And Ruby was able to give it. Before they parted, Ruby had sworn to say nothing of her meeting with Kate; and she went home to bed thinking: "What did Kate want to know all them things about Harve for? Maybe she's going to see 'Buster,' for all she didn't let on she knowed where he is!" She pictured the possible drama, but decided: "Why should I care? All that crowd's nothin' to me any more!"

Kate Hayes carried away with her early next morning a clear picture of Harvey Stokes's routine existence. She knew, for example, that every Saturday evening he drove home from his threshing outfit, starting in time to cross Thunder Creek ford and drive up to his own gate before dusk. She remembered that close beside the road leading down to the ford was an old log that would conceal a man lying behind it. When

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Harvey checked his grays for the descent into the creek bed, he would be an easy mark for "Buster"; and there'd be all night in which to make a get-away before anybody could possibly pick up the trail.

It was an excellent plan, simple, worthy of a Hayes. Yet simple plans sometimes become complicated by unexpected, unknown elements. In this case, Kate had unwittingly supplied the complication. "Jumbo" Cox had caught sight of her saddled pony behind the Engel barn as he left Ruby, and had lingered, hidden, to watch the two girls ride away. Recognizing Kate, he told Tom Winger, and the two reasoned that she was hatching some evil plot. They called "Cherokee Bill" into their council.

"Kate, she come to see how things is," the Indian commented. "Now she's goin' to tell 'Buster.' "

"Seems likely," Tom agreed.

"I think," Bill suggested, "some fellow ought to follow that Kate!" And when Tom nodded: "I get Wes Madden; he know all them Delaware an' Osage Eenyans over there where she's sure headin' for."

In the afternoon, therefore, Abel Madden's oldest boy, highly pleased and somewhat thrilled by his mission, jogged westward with instructions to intercept the camper's wagon, keep Kate Hayes in view and bring back information as to her movements.

Two days later, on Friday, Wes returned with the news that "Buster" Hayes had met his sister on Caney

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Creek, had traveled eastward alone and staked his horse, just before daybreak, in the good grass of a timbered draw at the head of Hickory Creek, twenty miles west of Thunder Creek.

This report Tom Winger carried to Nan after supper.

"Nan," he said, "I've come to speak to you about Harve. 'Buster' Hayes is on his trail." He told her the news Wes had brought, and explained:

"Bill an' me got it figured out that 'Buster' 'll come on from Hickory Creek to-night an' land somewhere on Thunder Creek before daylight to-morrow mornin'. He'll go into hidin' an' work down the creek. To-morrow's Saturday, an' Harve—what time does Harve get back from Walnut Creek?"

Nan listened with growing terror, and answered slowly:

"Harvey gets home Saturday about sundown."

"Think I'd better go an' tell Harve?" Tom asked.

"No. I'll drive across to-morrow morning. . . . But he won't believe 'Buster' is after him!" Nan looked up with troubled eyes. "I'll be back by noon; could you send some one over here early in the afternoon?"

"Sure. I'll come myself." Tom straightened in the saddle, tightened the reins, hesitated a moment, then asked:

"How are you, anyway, Nan? An' everything?"

"Oh, fine; busy as I can be, too. We're going to

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have a new school over on Thunder Creek, and I'll have to teach for a while. . . . You and Bill must come over and take part when we get the 'Literary' going again."

"I expect Bill might be useful," Tom laughed. "Well, I'll be over right after noon to-morrow." He touched his Nigger horse with the spur.

Nan was frightened. She believed that the silent, fiddling "Buster" Hayes was dangerous, more dangerous than Jack had ever been. She could also picture the evasive, slow-spoken Kate making herself an instrument of vengeance. She knew that Kate admired Jack's vivid, hair-trigger temperament, loved him wholeheartedly. Since the death of their parents, both Kate and "Buster" had leaned on Jack; he had been protector and provider, friend and second father.

And Ruby Engel? Nan wondered just what she had told Kate. . . . Ruby was bad, a poisonous influence. Nan hoped that Susan Dines was right when she said of Ruby: "That gal needs more excitement than she can get around here, an' she'll be leavin' us some of these days!"

Against the Hayes family and what Ruby Engel represented stood the forces of order and decency. . . . Here were Tom, Bill Ridge, Cox, and Wes Madden instantly and willingly taking up the defense of Harvey, the defense of law and order that must be established if life was to become secure. . . . It seemed

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curious that Harvey should hate Tom, despise "Jumbo" Cox and ridicule Bill Ridge!

Nan lay awake a long time that night.

She found Sam Davis talking with Harvey next morning when she reached the Thompson farm, east of Walnut Creek, where the threshing machine was working; and as she approached, Sam exclaimed dramatically:

"See, Harve, it's like I told you! Nan's come to warn you." He turned to her: "Ain't you?"

"About 'Buster' Hayes? Oh, Harvey, has Sam heard, too?"

"No," Harvey replied angrily. "He ain't heard anything, but he's been givin' me a cock an' bull story about seein' 'Buster' Hayes shootin' at me—in a dream!"

"I'm afraid the dream may come true, Harvey, if you aren't careful." Nan cut short his jeering protests to tell him what she had learned from Winger. Restless and contemptuous, he listened and when Sam Davis, shaking a troubled head, departed, he led Nan out of hearing of the threshing crew.

"I tell you, Nan," he stormed, "I won't have that fellow Winger hangin' around you, cookin' up stories like that! What does he take me for, a ten-year-old kid, to be scared out of the country by 'Buster' Hayes? He'd better—"

"Listen to me, Harvey," Nan interrupted. "Tom

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isn't certain, and nobody can be certain, just what 'Buster' is up to; but he's probably after you."

"I tell you, the whole thing 's a false alarm!" Harvey insisted. "What if Kate did go to meet 'Buster,' an' what if 'Buster' does come back to Thunder Creek? He ain't got the nerve to shoot."

"You may be right, Harvey," Nan said miserably, "but I don't believe it. Tom—"

"Just one thing," he cut in, angrily, "Tom Winger's got to keep away from you!" He seized her arm roughly. "Do you hear me?" Nan's eyes met his, flashing. "I won't have him hangin' around you!" His heavy face was crimson, his voice thick with fury.

"I'll drive back now, Harvey," Nan said quietly. He turned abruptly and tramped away to take his place at the feeding platform.

When Winger appeared in the afternoon, Wes Madden was with him. Nan listened with throbbing heart to Wes's report: "Buster" had arrived late at night three miles above the ford on Thunder Creek, and at daybreak had ridden south through the timber. She told Tom of Harvey's refusal to believe that he was in danger, and Tom offered:

"I'll take Bill Ridge an' Wes, an' we'll go over an' see if we can't head 'Buster' off. Don't you worry, Nan; we'll be there in plenty of time!"

"All right, Tom," she agreed soberly. "But, oh, do be careful, you and the other boys!"

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When the two had ridden away, there began for Nan a seemingly interminable afternoon. Waiting became intolerable, and she persuaded Billy Dines to go with her to Harvey's Thunder Creek home. They got there before sunset; Nan stood at the gate, listening for the sound of buggy wheels coming down the rocky slope beyond the creek.

Tom Winger and his "posse" (as he referred grinningly to Bill and Wes) approached Thunder Creek above the point where "Buster" had spent the night. They rode for a time in silence, slowly and cautiously, separated from one another, stopping often to listen. Then Wes dismounted to range forward on foot. He came back to report that he had picked up the horse's track leading on towards the ford. Tom sent him forward again, on foot, while he and Bill followed with his horse.

A mile above the ford, Wes stopped them to report:

"His horse is hid right down there under the creek bank; I seen his tracks; he's workin' down this side close to the creek."

"All right," Tom answered in a whisper. "We'll leave our horses tied here an' move down on him. We'll spread out. Bill, you go along close to the creek, Wes takes the edge of the timber an' I'll stay between you." He looked inquiringly at the others, who nodded. They pulled their belts around so that the handles of their pistols were in front, ready to their hands.

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"We go dead slow, see? No noise. There's plenty of time."

Deliberate and cautious as their advance was, their movements yet created some commotion amongst the birds gathering to roost in the timber and set an occasional squirrel to chattering. "Buster" Hayes, concealed beside the road, between a rotting hackberry log and a brush heap, noted this tree-top confusion and began to listen uneasily. A cow, he thought, might be wandering through the woods. But a cow would make familiar noises, and whatever it was that disturbed the birds was approaching silently. Very softly, "Buster" reversed his front and reached forward from his prone position to make, with the long barrel of his forty-five, three little peepholes through the brush heap.

The disturbance came nearer, almost imperceptible in its advance. "Buster" could now see dimly the peering, head-twisting birds fluttering forward a few feet at a time as they twittered inquiringly; and as he listened a slight shiver of fear crept into his breast, edging aside ever so slightly the cold purpose that had thus far filled his mind and driven him on.

He had told no one among his companions of his purpose and was sure that he had not been observed on his ride from the Caney Creek rendezvous of Pat Dawson's gang. But something might have betrayed him, something that he could not foresee. . . . Suddenly a crow hopped off a dead branch almost overhead with an irritated, "ca-a-a-w!" Startled, "Buster" raised

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his head to look around. Bill Ridge, closing in along the road from the ford, saw the movement, and crept forward with infinite caution to a point where he could cover the prone figure.

Tom Winger, coming straight toward the concealing brush heap, moving cautiously from tree to tree, suddenly heard the report of a pistol and felt something hot and sharp nip his shoulder. He dropped swiftly and rolled behind a tree as a puff of blue-gray smoke rose from the brush heap. His left arm was helpless and his shoulder bleeding.

"Buster" had fired hastily, in an instinctive reaction of alarm; but Bill Ridge, rising to his knees, answered with an admirably precise aim; and "Buster" rolled over, gasping and beating the brush for some moments before falling quiet forever.

Wes Madden ran to Tom, who had called out, as Bill Ridge warily approached the body of his victim. At the same moment, at the top of the rocky slope leading into Thunder Creek timber, Harvey Stokes whipped his grays into a gallop. They came down past the roadside group at the run, buggy wheels dancing and screaming over the stones, with Harvey cursing and urging them forward. They hit the water with a plunging splash and, under the whip, scrambled up the other bank.

Nan had started running towards the ford at the sound of shots, and she had to jump aside to avoid being run down by Harvey, whom she saw, obviously

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unharmed, crouched forward in the buggy, a white-faced victim of terror, beating the grays. She called to him, but he paid no attention.

Harvey was safe, but what about Tom? She turned from her astonished view of Harvey's retreating back and ran on toward the ford, lifting her voice in an instinctive, anguished cry:

"Tom! Oh, Tom!"

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CHAPTER XXIII

SUDDEN DEATH AND—A RECEPTION

"CHEROKEE BILL" Ridge's quiet voice, as he came to meet her at the roadside, answered Nan's frantic appeal:

"He's right in here; yes, he's hurt." Taking her arm, he guided her to Tom, propped against a tree trunk, his right hand holding up the helpless left arm while Wes Madden attempted to staunch the flow of blood. There was still light enough for Nan to see the sweat drops on his forehead, signals of the racking pain he suffered, and the frowning concentration of the effort he was making to avoid fainting.

Nan dropped to her knees at his side.

"Tom, is it bad?" she whispered. One of her hands went instinctively to the gripping fingers under the sagging elbow, and the other touched a big sodden handkerchief which Wes Madden was holding awkwardly against the bullet-punctured blue flannel shirt at the shoulder.

"Hurts a little," Tom answered, with an effort that suggested a miser doling out gold pieces. He managed a smile, too; and Nan's eyes, meeting it, saw how white and bloodless was his face.

"Poor boy!" Nan's fingers pressed Tom's right

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hand as she spoke. Then she turned to Bill Ridge to say: "Tell Uncle Billy and Harvey to come and bring the spring wagon," and, to Wes Madden: "Help me open his shirt."

They stripped the blood-soaked garment down from the wounded shoulder. Nan made the left sleeve serve as a rough sling for the dangling arm, and put the end into Winger's right hand.

"Can you hold this, Tom?"

"Sure." He took the bunched sleeve-end from her fingers. His eyes followed her movements, noting the quick, impatient gesture with which she tucked back a loose lock of hair. She folded Wes's big handkerchief, and Tom lifted the quivering elbow while she drew the improvised bandage tight under the armpit and over the wounds, front and back. Her hands pressed it firmly against the shoulder.

"I think that's better," she said, maintaining the pressure; she looked up at young Wes, standing silent and anxious over Tom's extended legs, to ask:

"Buster—did he get away?"

Wes shook his head and pointed.

"He's over there; Bill got him!"

"Oh . . . poor Buster!" The shock of the tragedy struck her suddenly, her knees began to tremble and her eyes to fill with tears. A feeling of terror seized her, shook her; she sat down and covered her eyes with her hands. Wes leaned forward to press his own fumbling hands against Tom's bandaged shoulder.

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Into her fluid imagination flashed a picture of the deadly, swift battle; the reverberations of the two shots sounded again in her ears. . . . Out of the turmoil of impressions and swift memory-flashes emerged a picture of Jack, handsome, debonair, smiling up at her; now Jack was in prison, worse than dead—and "Buster"— Her mind turned to Kate Hayes, waiting for news, then wilting in sorrow and bitterness at the words some one would have to speak. . . . These things had to be, but life was cruel! Nan began to weep, a poignant note, almost a child's frightened cry.

Tom's right hand sought one of hers, gripped it fiercely.

"Don't, Nan!" he muttered. "It's all right."

"Yes, I know, Tom," she answered shakily and returned the pressure of his fingers. Then, getting hold of herself, she exclaimed: "We must get you to bed!" She got to her knees again to adjust the sleeve-sling as she heard Harvey, her uncle and Bill Ridge driving rapidly towards them.

Harvey was silent as he stumbled across the stiff weedstalks and scattered brush to the group. He trembled, fumbled irritatingly as he tried to help Bill Ridge and Dines lift Tom to his feet. Winger grimly protested:

"Here, Bill, grab me 'round the waist an' I'll walk!"

Bill half lifted him into the wagon; Nan and her uncle climbed in after. She sat on the floor to maintain the pressure on the handkerchief bandage.

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Tom was installed in the north room of Harvey's house. Nan removed a fragment of shirt from the wound, washed the blood from the shoulder and bound it tightly with many folds of clean cloth. Bill Ridge galloped away to Big Grove for Dr. Hardwick, Hank Redbird and Coroner Russel—the two latter to take charge of "Buster" Hayes's body. On the way he stopped to report the tragedy to Susan Dines, who hitched up a team at once to drive to Nan; and at Big Grove he sent a telegram to Gabe Horner.

Just as Susan Dines was driving away, Sam Davis arrived, pounding his heels against a plow horse's ribs and hailing through the darkness:

"Say, is Tom Winger shot?"

She waited for the old man to come up, and observed gravely:

"It beats me, Sam, how you get to know these things."

"Well, there's somethin' else—you tell Tom to watch out—he ain't through with trouble yet, one kind or another—" The old man's words became a mumble. As he turned away, he added: "I'll be over in the mornin'."

In the Stokes kitchen, where Nan had prepared supper for the men while Billy Dines was with Tom, Harvey sat stubbornly silent, his eyes following her movements. At length, he seized Nan's arm as she passed close to his chair and accused her in an angry whisper:

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"You was cryin' over that fellow; I seen you'd been cryin'!"

Nan stood quite still, her eyes opening wide with astonishment as she looked at his flushed face.

"What!" she gasped.

"Why was you cryin'?" Nan made no reply. "Hey? Tell me!"

His grip of her arm was hurting her; and she leaned close to whisper:

"Don't be a fool, Harvey! Tom saved your life; he's in there, suffering—you mustn't let him hear you say such things." He released her arm, and she stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder. Presently she whispered:

"I don't know why I cried, Harvey. I couldn't tell how bad his hurt was—"

"That's what I thought," he interrupted, in a weak, dolorous wail. Nan went on:

"I'd been worried all day about you, and—oh, the killing and all. Can't you understand!"

"Maybe," he muttered, "I'm foolish, awful jealous, Nan."

He pushed aside a plate to make room for an elbow on which he rested his forehead. For a minute, Nan stood in silence. There was nothing her unstirred heart prompted her to say. "A great, pitiable baby!" she thought with an involuntary thrill of contempt.

"You have your supper now, Harvey," she whis-

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pered; "you and Uncle Billy; I'm going in to sit with Tom."

Harvey jerked himself upright in the chair and put out a hand.

"Nan, you stay here!"

"Listen to me, Harvey!" Nan's lips came close to his ear as she went on: "Tom needs me and I'm going in to him. You *must not* be such a jealous idiot! He risked his life for you, don't you realize that?" Her whisper was fierce, urgent. "Are you a human being, Harvey? I wonder! Can't you think of anything but your own miserable jealousy?"

"Nan," he urged weakly, "don't go. He ain't hurt bad; an' it's hell for me to think of you in there with him."

"For my sake, Harvey, don't say or think such things!" Nan's self-control was nearly gone, her nerves stretched and tingling, but before she turned towards the connecting door she forced herself to say:

"Please come in and see him after you've had your supper."

"Me?" A pale grin twisted his mouth as he rose slowly. "I—I'm goin' out," he stammered. "Got to —to look after my team."

Nan watched him leave the kitchen and then went in to take her uncle's place beside the bed on which Winger lay quiet and tensed against the throb of his wounded shoulder. His eyes lifted to Nan as she entered.

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"Want anything, Tom?" She leaned over him, adjusting the pillows. He shook his head slightly, smiled and turned the palm of his right hand up suggestively; Nan dropped her firm hand into it, returned the quick pressure of his fingers, then withdrew it.

"I think I *would* like a drink of water," he told her, and sighed.

Nan went to the well for fresh water, and saw Wes Madden, returning from Thunder Creek bottom with the horses. She gave Tom a drink and, when Harvey and Wes entered the kitchen together, she poured coffee for them. Wes questioned in a solemn undertone:

"How's he makin' it?"

"Just fine!" Billy Dines answered for her, with a smile at the boy's affectionate concern. "Go in and see him after you eat."

"He ain't hurt bad," Harvey grumbled sullenly. "Needs to be left alone, that's all." Wes stared at him wonderingly.

"Yes, I'll sure go in," he assured Uncle Billy.

Susan Dines arrived, to find Nan and Wes sitting silent beside Tom in the dim light of a shaded lamp. Nan hugged the old woman warmly, and kept her arm about her waist as she bent over Tom and laid a cool palm on his forehead.

"My, Tom," Susan exclaimed, smiling, "you sure had a battle, didn't you?"

"Sure did, Aunt Susan," he agreed, heartened by her affectionate tone and using the old form of address,

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then grinning weakly: "But it looks like Bill an' Wes an' me has made two thousand dollars out of it."

"That's right, so you did! . . . Now, Nancy, you an' Wes go along into the kitchen. I don't need you." When they had gone: "You need to keep mighty quiet, young man. . . . Let me look at that bandage." She very gently drew aside the light quilt that covered his shoulder to examine the thick, stiffening wrappings. "How does it feel, Tom?"

"Hurts like hell, Aunt Susan! 'Scuse me—"

"I bet it sure does hurt like hell, Tom!" the old woman agreed promptly, replacing the covering. "Now all we got to do is wait for the doctor. . . . I expect maybe Gabe Horner'll hop a train an' come up, don't you?"

The suggestion pleased Tom, who had been thinking that the "dog house" would be a cheerless place in which to spend weeks of convalescence. If Gabe came—and he had no doubt he would—he would fix it up so that he need not be alone during that dreary time. He smiled, and the lines of tension on his face relaxed as Susan Dines took his hand between her palms and stroked it soothingly. Soon the murmur of voices in the kitchen ceased to mean anything to him.

Dr. Hardwick found him in this state of exhausted reaction, roused him to submit to the ardent sting of antiseptic swabbing and probing, the firm, expert fitting of a gauze-bandage harness, gave him a sedative and left him in Susan Dines's care.

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Billy Dines and Nan drove away, leaving Bill Ridge, Wes Madden and the two Big Grove officials, who had returned with Bill, to put the body of "Buster" Hayes into a wagon for the start of its last journey.

Nan went to bed, but, tired as she was, she could not sleep. Her mind kept revolving about the day's tragedy, troubling over the future. It was nearly dawn before her eyes closed, and her dreams were anxious, disturbed; Harvey and Tom marched through them; they were filled with alarms, gunshots, sorrow.

Early next morning, Sunday, began a long, curious reception in Tom Winger's honor. The story of the brief, deadly battle had spread quickly. Soon after breakfast near neighbors began arriving; the Moffetts on foot, the Abel Maddens in a farm wagon, the Abe Maddens in a buggy, two Gourd boys (Jennie Stokes's brothers) on horseback. They came quietly, spoke softly, the women in the kitchen with Susan Dines, the men squatting outside in the mellow late autumn sunshine, talking over the details of the story with Wes Madden, who had stayed on. Harvey, too, was drawn into the talk, and he grew more and more resentful against a fate that had made him debtor to Tom.

As later visitors arrived, the first comers drifted away, leaving brief, sympathetic messages: "Tell that old boy to hurry up an' get well"; "Awful glad he's gettin' along all right!"; "if Tom wants anything, just tell him to holler." And so on; casual-seeming, warm-

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hearted words from men who liked him—Henry Bear, "Dink" Moffett, the Maddens, Joe Tiger.

Will and Paul Dunkin came at noon to join the outside group, while Mrs. Dunkin and Myrtle went in to help Susan Dines prepare dinner. Dr. Hardwick brought from Big Grove a telegram from Gabe Horner:

"Buck up, boy, and don't worry over nothing. Am on my way."

All day the procession continued, and when the last visitor had departed, Susan Dines observed:

"Too bad, Tom, you couldn't see all the folks; I guess nearly everybody you ever heard of has been here to ask after you."

Nan, who had returned in the afternoon with her uncle, came in to sit beside him while Susan and Billy Dines, the Dunkins and Harvey ate supper. He was restless, a bit feverish, and she fanned him quietly. Presently, his eyes caught and held hers.

"It's mighty good to have you here, Nan," he whispered, then muttered hoarsely: "What a derned fool I've been!"

"Hush, Tom," she smiled gently. "Don't talk, just try to sleep."

At the sound of scraping chairs in the kitchen, Nan laid her fingers lightly on his hand and went out, while Susan Dines resumed her post beside Tom. Nan's heart was heavy; and through her mind, like a tantalizing refrain, ran Tom's whisper, "What a derned fool I've been!"

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CHAPTER XXIV

GABE HORNER IN CHARGE

AT daybreak next morning, when Harvey, before leaving for his work, came in to say a grudging good-by, Tom said:

"Harve, I'm sorry to impose on you this way, but I reckon Gabe Horner'll take me off your hands in a few days."

"That's all right," Harvey muttered, drawing the back of his hand across his mustache, which reflected points of light where it had been touched by bacon grease. It was difficult, but he went on: "I guess I owe you a whole lot more'n you do me." His glance met Tom's for an instant, flitted past, and he shifted uneasily. "Stay right here long's you want to." After a minute of awkward silence: "Well, I got to be movin'." He retreated to the kitchen, leaving Tom disappointed and resentful.

Susan Dines was left alone to care for Tom, "in peace" as she explained in a satisfied tone to the patient. At dusk, however, Dr. Hardwick appeared with Billy Dines, who came prepared to spend the night, and Gabe Horner. Meeting the three men at the door, she exclaimed in mock consternation:

"My gracious, here's another delegation!"

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"Howdy, Miz Dines!" the Texan greeted her cordially and shook her hand. "Can I come in with the Doc an' view the remains?" His laughter was echoed by Tom's half-embarrassed welcoming smile and his:

"Dern glad to see you, old timer." His good hand was seized and crushed in that of the cattleman, whose regard became fixed on the trussed-up shoulder.

"Dog-gone, they sure got you hog-tied, ain't they, boy? Think you'll ever get rid of that harness?" They exchanged grins.

Dr. Hardwick sent the cattleman out while he and Susan Dines attended to the patient, and later, as the three men sat eating a belated supper, he promised:

"If all goes as well as I expect, Mr. Horner, you can take your young man to your house in three or four days more."

"Good," said the cattleman, and explained to Billy Dines: "My sister Josie come up from Texas with me, an' she's fixin' that new house of mine at Big Grove into a regular horspital."

After the doctor's departure, Horner insisted upon taking the cot beside Tom's bed and sending Susan Dines to get a night of uninterrupted sleep.

On the way to the G. H. ranch headquarters next day, Horner called on Nan. He stayed for noon dinner and sat in the kitchen listening to her winter plans and her account of Harvey's haying operations.

"So he's sellin' hay to Tom an' Bill," he commented, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I reckon I'll have to inspect

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it for Tom. . . . Him gettin' shot up that way leaves me short a foreman an' Bill short a partner. Looks like I'm elected to set in in Tom's place, maybe stay up here all winter." He turned to Nan with a half-serious question: "Do you reckon sister Josie an' me could work into things around here, dances an' that 'Literary' you started an' so forth?"

"Oh, will you, Mr. Horner?" Nan's eager question was a joyous reflection of her hope. "It's just what we want, to get folks together, get them pulling together as friends, the way Tom's been doing."

"Yes," the old cattleman assented, "I've been mighty well pleased at the way Tom's taken to this country. He seems to be thick as thieves with all the neighbors, Indians an' whites—an' dog-gone if he ain't got them Lucky Creek niggers eatin' out of his hand, too!"

"All that's a good thing for him, and you, too, Mr. Horner." Nan paused in her work to emphasize her point. "I've noticed that the cattlemen who make friends around here don't lose steers, don't have their horses stolen—and they get the farmer's stalk fields for their cattle to feed over after the corn's gathered."

They gossiped on; Gabe told of his sister's arrangements for caring for Tom, and made her promise to call on Josie the next time she drove to Big Grove. Nan told him that Harvey's brother, Vergil, was coming back. "Chief Murray's going to make him Solicitor of this District," Nan said.

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"So Murray got elected Chief, did he? . . . What's a Solicitor?"

"Tribal prosecuting attorney," she explained. "Vergil's a lawyer now, authorized to practice in the Indian courts."

"You don't say!" he laughed. "I'd always thought of Indians, before I looked into the situation up here, about the way a fellow back in New York would. I'd thought they was all more or less like old Geronimo, still oncivilized an' hell bent for the warpath if they got half a chance. . . . But up here . . . well, they ain't that way at all." He paused to consider his new estimate.

"Here they've got a regular government: chief, second chief, a senate, a council, courts, schools, asylums, churches an' preachers. They've got plenty of educated men an' women; they've got lawyers an' doctors an' traders; they've got their political parties an' tribal newspapers an' public men that have growed up thinkin' an' talkin' about their own problems till they can hold their own with Congress when they go to Washington as delegates. . . .

"The way I size 'em up—if you ain't tired of hearin' a windy old timer like me shoot off his mouth—these Indians have got to be mighty like regular folks that know what they want an' know how to get it."

"Anyway," Nan observed, "they've got Vergil on their side."

"Yes, that's what I mean," the cattleman assented.

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"Looks to me like it's the right way to settle things—get both races pullin' together for the same things, the way you want folks to do around here."

"The way you and 'Sofkey' Horseford get along." Nan smiled in sympathy with his enthusiasm.

"Now you said it, Nan!" Horner agreed. "That old rascal's a mighty good friend of mine."

Horner rode away with a feeling of admiration and affection for Nan that stirred him to a vigorous reflection.

"Dern his hide!" He was thinking of Tom Winger. "Makes me sick to think of him losin' out with Nan; an' they tell me that Stokes fellow's turnin' out to be a miser an' a first-class son of a bow-legged crawfish. . . .

"I wonder," he speculated presently, "if Nan *will* stop in an' see Josie? It'd do Sis good to lay eyes on her. . . ."

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CHAPTER XXV

A GAME OF "I SPY!"

NOT until the following week did Nan find opportunity to call on Josie Horner at Big Grove. Then, her household supplies stored in the back of the spring wagon, she drove up the freshly-graded dirt street to the shining new house where Tom was being cared for.

She tied her mares to the hitching post beside the white-painted picket gate, let her sunbonnet fall back from her head and swung up the broad-flagged walk to the wide south veranda.

Through the oblong of plate glass that Gabe had put in as a front-parlor window, Josie Horner saw Nan approaching, noted with quick approval her vigorous, instinctive grace of movement—shoulders loose and erect, head up, wide-opened, glancing eyes that she guessed were blue to set off the shining mass of Titian hair, her walk a loose-kneed, forward-thrusting and effortless progress—"graceful," Josie Horner thought of Nan's carriage and movement, "and a real get-there gait, too!"

She turned to Tom, still confined to this big room, which had been transformed into a temporary hospital, and announced:

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"I just know that's Nan Forest coming in here—from what Gabe has told me about her. . . . I'll go let her in."

Tom waited for what seemed to him a long time before Nan entered. Gabe's tall, gray-haired and white-handed sister came in with an arm about Nan's waist and a look of friendly animation on her face. "She's fell for Nan, hard!" Tom thought, as he struggled to raise himself to a more upright position and held out his hand.

"Hello, Tom!" Nan took the outstretched hand between both of her own for a moment, her eyes going to the bandaged shoulder. "Miss Horner says you're getting restless."

"She's sure right!" Tom said energetically, and Nan laughed. "How's everything with you?"

"Going fine, Tom." Nan sat down to give him, tersely, the news of Thunder Creek and the Walnut Creeks:

"Your hay has been delivered to Mr. Horner, and he and Bill are fencing the stacks. . . . The round-up starts next week. . . . I've got a big package of school books out in the wagon. . . . I'll be ready to start teaching as soon as Sam Davis gets the schoolhouse in shape. . . . Harvey's still busy threshing east of Walnut Creek, about six miles north of Big Grove. . . . Jumbo wanted me to ask you when you're coming back to the 'dog house' and when you're going to 'fork a bronc' again." Nan paused.

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"How's Bill?" Tom asked, somewhat anxiously. "Is he still havin' bad dreams on account of shootin' 'Buster'?"

"No, he's all right again. Mr. Kearns is going to collect that reward for you three boys. Did you know that 'Buster' shot another man in a hold-up over in the Osage country?"

"No! Well, he was one bad *hombre*. . . . Any news of Kate?"

"Yes. Kate went to Denver, to open a restaurant, and Tot Colbert says she and Ruby Engel are going out there to help her."

At Nan's mention of Ruby, Tom's eyes left her face; then, with a slightly embarrassed laugh, he commented:

"So Ruby an' Tot intend to be biscuit shooters?" They both laughed, Tom with relief at the knowledge that Nan no longer believed him to be entangled with the Engel girl.

Josie Horner, who had sat through their talk as an interested listener, accompanied Nan to her team, an arm once more about her waist; and at the gate she paused to say:

"You make me envious, Miss Forest. Such a lot to do up here on the prairie, and you so eager and interested! Like Gabe and Mr. Tom."

Nan smiled.

"Oh, Miss Horner, won't you call me 'Nan,' as your brother does?" she asked impulsively.

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"Yes, of course, Nan. I've told Gabe, when he's talked to me about you, that he must be in his second childhood, the way he's raved, but I take it back. . . . My, what hair!" She drew Nan's bonnet forward over the living bronze crown and let her go. "Come in and see me every time you come to town!"

While Nan sent Chiquita and Bess's Dolly straight to her uncle's at the trot, Ruby Engel made a long detour from Big Grove on her way home. It included a visit to Harvey, whom she called down from the threshing machine to warn:

"Say, Harve, if I was you I'd keep an eye on Nan."

His face flushed and he came closer, a flame of jealous anger clouding the bleak gray of his eyes and touching his sun-burned cheek under the stubble beard.

"What do you mean?" he demanded huskily. But Ruby did not answer for a minute, excited by his obvious willingness to listen.

"The poor fool!" she thought. "He's stuck on that pie-face Nan, an' yet he'll believe anything." She tried him:

"Well, it's none of my business, but I happened to be in Day's store to-day an' saw Miss Horner come in. She was still there when I rode out an' seen Nan's team hitched in front of Horner's gate." Ruby paused to enjoy the effect of this, then added, casually: "I hear Tom's up an' around the house now."

"What else—did you see—did you wait—"

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"'Course not. What do you take me for, Harve, a spy?" Ruby laughed derisively and left Harvey to nourish his jealous anger with the suspicion she had raised.

At sunset, he appeared at the Dines gate. Nan heard the familiar rattle of his buggy and came to the kitchen door to greet him cheerily:

"Well, hello, Harvey; I didn't expect to see you to-day; you've come just in time—supper 'll be ready in ten minutes."

She was happy at his unexpected arrival and the anticipation of an evening with him. Perhaps, she thought, they might break down those barriers of jealousy and morose distrust which he had seemed intent upon erecting between them!

"Where you been to-day?" His voice was harsh as he stamped into the kitchen and saw that she was alone. Nan went up to him quietly to put her hands on his shoulders and kiss him. Her eyes searching his dodging eyes curiously, she answered:

"I drove to Big Grove for the school books."

"Oh," he grunted, "an' for what else?"

"I also stopped in to see Miss Horner and Tom," she answered steadily. "Why do you ask?"

"What made you stop an' see him?" His tone was accusing.

"Are you crazy, Harvey?" Nan forced his eyes to meet hers. "Because I wanted to know Gabe Horner's sister, and how Tom was."

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"Ain't I told you to keep away from that fellow?" he muttered tensely.

Nan's head went up with a snap and her eyes blazed as she cried:

"You're insulting, Harvey! I won't have it; I won't allow you to say such things. Can't you see what it means?"

"Sure; can't you?" he jeered, and Nan cried in sudden fury.

"You get out of this kitchen, and stay out until you come to your senses!"

Stupidly, he attempted to carry on his attack:

"You was alone with that fellow! I happen to know Miss Horner wasn't there."

"What!" Nan turned at his accusation, looked at him bleakly. "You're still in my kitchen?" She made three rapid steps toward him. In the corners of her eyes, that seemed to have turned green in a flash, stood involuntary tears. "Get out," she breathed, "quick!" Harvey stood still, failing to understand the leashed fury that made her voice vibrate. Then Nan rushed him, head down and fists thrust suddenly against his chest. She pushed him off his balance; he went backwards, a heel caught the low doorsill and he fell outside with a heavy thud of his shoulders on the packed dirt, his hat rolling away from his instinctive grasp. Breathless, he lay for a moment, gasped, and a vast surprise held him motionless, his gray eyes gazing in bewilderment at Nan in the doorway.

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She had a quick revulsion of feeling; fear that Harvey might be hurt, and shame because of her burst of anger smote her.

"Oh, Harvey!" She was at his side. He sat up slowly. "I'm sorry!" Then gently: "Are you hurt?"

He made no answer, but went to untie his team and drive furiously away.

Still sore and resentful, next day Harvey undertook to carry out a furtive program of espionage. The picture of Nan driving to Big Grove to see Tom Winger formed and magnified in his mind; and at noon he left the threshing outfit and drove to Walnut Creek ford. Concealing his team in the timber, he waited, cold and miserable, until nearly sunset expecting (and at moments cursing himself for expecting) Nan to pass by on the way back from Big Grove. She didn't, and he wondered whether or not he had arrived too late. On the following day, he was hidden beside the road before noon, but again no Nan appeared.

His sleep became fitful, broken by half-waking visions of Nan running from him, escaping his dominance, gadding about all over the country. The pictures darkened, and he saw her in Tom Winger's arms, saw her enticing Gabe Horner. Again, in the grip of his evil fancies, Nan repulsed his love and laughed him to scorn.

His solitary vigils were dominated by the thought that Ruby Engel knew how the minds of women

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worked: "She's sure a wise one when it comes to men"! Feeding on the sour stuff of suspicion and resentment, his only temporary relief from brooding was the trip to Walnut Creek ford and the prospect of action. . . .

After another day of watching, he was rewarded. Nan drove past, coming from Big Grove, and Tom Winger was on the seat beside her! She must have started to town early for him to have missed seeing her drive in. With a sudden tightening of the throat, Harvey noted that behind the seat was a trunk. Nan was driving slowly, and Winger was supporting his healing shoulder with a hand under the elbow—as he had seen him sitting after "Buster's" shot.

Turning his grays into the road, Harvey started in pursuit; and because he kept his eyes fixed upon the two, he failed to see Gabe Horner and his sister, in a buggy, following him. He drove slowly, just keeping within sight of Nan. Gabe Horner, coming close enough to recognize Harvey, slowed his own team to puzzle out the reason for his unexpected appearance. Delayed though he had been by Josie's anxious care to take along everything that could be needed for Tom's comfort at the "dog house" where, now that he could move about, he had insisted upon going, Horner yet felt certain that Harvey had not followed Nan out of Big Grove. However, he said nothing to his sister.

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As Harvey came out of the blackjacks, beyond Little Walnut Creek, he saw Nan standing beside the spring wagon that had been stopped at the ranch gate, a hand lifted helpfully toward Tom, who got down a bit unsteadily. Then the two walked slowly away and disappeared behind the log ranch house. Harvey whipped his grays into a gallop, brought them up sharply at the gate, jumped from his buggy and ran heavily, breathing oaths, towards the cabin. Behind him, Gabe Horner surprised his sister by jerking the whip from its socket and lashing his own team into a run.

"It's that fellow Stokes," he explained hurriedly, "an' he'll jump Tom!"

Nan was standing at the door of the "dog house," her hand still under Tom's arm and her head turned inquiringly as Harvey rounded the corner. His face was working with the fury of his anger and his fists were raised as though to beat Tom down as he bellowed:

"I got you now, you damn' snake!"

Nan whirled to meet him, amazed and terrified. He attempted to step past her.

"Harvey!" She seized his arm; he thrust a hand against her breast, but she held on.

"Get out of my way!" he shouted. "You damned——!"

Gabe Horner, who had flung the reins to his confused and speechless sister, leaped forward to thrust

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himself between Nan and Harvey. His hand went to the holster under his vest, his eyes fixed themselves compellingly on Harvey, and he spoke slowly, each distinct word a cold challenge:

"Well, Mr. Stokes?"

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CHAPTER XXVI

FUEL TO THE FLAME

THE cattleman's half-drawled words and the grim challenge of his gaze, backed by the gesture toward his holstered pistol, arrested Harvey's rush; he glanced from one to the other and drew the back of a hand nervously across his mustached mouth. He tried vainly to speak; his lips worked, but no sound came from them.

Josie Horner, her mind in a whirl and realizing that danger was imminent, got quickly down from the buggy to follow her brother. She came upon the three, posed as though awaiting a director's command, each face registering its appropriate emotion. With quick resourcefulness, she stepped close. Her words broke the spell:

"Nan, is this—is this Mr. Stokes?" Her hand went out to the stupefied man, whose eyes turned slowly to her face.

"Yes," Nan wrenched her mind from the vision of Harvey's rush and Tom's bloodless yet somehow blazing face as he had staggered after her, intent upon her protection. "Harvey, this is Miss Horner."

Gabe's sister moved closer, her hand still outstretched, to say:

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"I'm pleased to know you, Mr. Stokes."

"How d'you do?" he mumbled, raising limp fingers to her hand.

"Mr. Tom got so restless in town," Josie Horner explained, keeping her eyes persistently upon Harvey's and compelling his attention as she thrust the words slowly at him, "we just had to move him out here. I was lucky enough to find Nan in town and asked her to help." Harvey shifted uneasily, then Josie turned to her brother. "Gabe, before Mr. Stokes goes, get him to help you carry in Tom's trunk."

"If I was you," the cattleman remarked in low-voiced emphasis as he and Harvey lifted the trunk out of Nan's wagon, "an' expected to marry Nan Forest, I wouldn't make a damn fool of myself again." Harvey's only response was to glare at Horner.

Nan said good night to Josie, Gabe Horner and Tom in a steady voice and climbed into the spring wagon. Paying no attention to the others, Harvey came straight to her.

"Let me ride with you, Nan," he suggested. "I'll hitch the grays behind. Maybe I'd better explain to you—"

"You can't, Harvey." Nan's look disclosed the disgust and horror she felt because of the scene she had just passed through. "Don't ever come near me or speak to me again." She spoke with a clear but difficult slowness. "Our engagement is over, understand? You're free—and so am I, Harvey." With

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no other words, and without another glance at the man who stood staring at her, she drove off.

Her mind was in a tumult, a confusion of feelings shook her; but over and above everything else rose a feeling of relief. She was glad—she knew it now—that she was not going to marry Harvey.

"Why, we're really strangers," she thought. "There's nothing important that we agree about. . . . He'd want me to live shut up in a box—it's not only Tom he's jealous of, Tom's just the excuse, it's everything, all my friends, Uncle and Aunty, even, my work, too—he was angry because I'm to teach school." Her mind swung to a new angle: "I ought never to have promised to marry him—I see that now." At last it was clear to her, and she faced the fact, that she had never loved Harvey. "Why did I do it!" she cried. "I was silly, and—I was thinking of Dad. But"—a hot flush stained her cheeks, white enough before—"I was hurt, and miserable about Tom . . . I ought to have known. . . ."

It was over now, and yet—she felt a sense of failure, of humiliation. A broken engagement was taken seriously in the long grass country, and she knew there would be criticism, unfriendly comment. Folks would blame her for throwing over a quiet, hard-working man; they would not know how Harvey had acted.

"But I'm right," Nan repeated, "and he doesn't really love me, any more than I do him! It's a sort

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of hate that makes him act the way he has, because I won't be just a slave to his wishes—oh, I wish I'd never seen him!" Her eyes were blinded by tears.

Nan told her aunt what had occurred, tried to picture the long ordeal of jealousy, suspicion, even insult, that she had suffered. "This was the last straw, Aunty; something cracked inside me. I just couldn't marry Harvey now." She shivered in Susan Dines's arms. Aunty, you do understand?"

"Of course, honey lamb," the old woman comforted her, "ain't I got eyes in my head! I never was sure of Harvey, an' if you know now in your heart—well, I'm glad you found out in time. It'll be hard for both of you for a while, but it would've been a thousand times harder if you 'd got married an' then—"

The routine of life was resumed. Not wishing to make it harder for Harvey, Nan said nothing to any one else, and Susan Dines agreed that time would clear up the muddle. "No use blabbin' your troubles, honey lamb!" She kissed the girl with a sort of defiant tenderness.

Harvey returned to his threshing outfit in sullen anger. He had made a fool of himself, but he hadn't changed his mind about Nan and Tom: "Her an' that damn fellow was drivin' together, an' if the Horners hadn't come meddlin' in I'd have learned him to let what's mine alone!" Nan was too much of a gad-

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about, anyway, chattering with everybody, mixing in the silly social doings, playing the favorite.

Mingled with his anger was a dumb self-pity, a hurt vanity. She didn't want him to come near her or speak to her again, eh? "Well, she ain't the only girl."

His mind began to dwell on Ruby Engel. . . .

Two days later, in Big Grove, he met Ruby on the street.

"Hello, Harve," she greeted him, smiling. "It's good for sore eyes to see you again." She stepped close. "Say," she asked confidentially, "did you catch Nan?" and before he could answer: "I hear she helped Tom move out to the dog house!" She laughed.

"Yes, I—I seen 'em," Harvey admitted, "but the Horners was with 'em." Ruby was quick to note the darkening of his face even as he defended Nan against her insinuations.

"Listen, Harve," she proposed, "come up here a minute; I want to talk to you." She led him up the wooden stairway to the second floor of the bank building.

She was determined to widen the breach between Nan and Harvey. She hated Nan, believed it was Nan's fault that Tom had thrown her over, that "Cherokee Bill" had dropped away, that "Jumbo" had grown cold and that Joe Tiger had stopped coming to see her. Incapable of realizing her own shortcomings, she believed Nan had become actively hostile, turned

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the neighborhood against her and driven her almost into the position of an outcast.

"If I was you, Harve," she began, as they stood in the semi-gloom of the public corridor between the second-floor offices, "I'd keep an eye on Nan these days. The prairie's a mighty big place, with plenty of timbered draws, an' I hear Tom's ridin' again." She watched him wince at this, and stabbed once more: "Nan's out on that Chiquita pony of hers nearly every day, too. . . . Of course, it's none of my business, but I hate to think of them two puttin' things over on a man like you!"

An angry red mounting to his cheeks, Harvey gripped her soft arm.

"Do you know somethin' you ain't told me?" he demanded.

"Don't, Harve," she protested in a whisper, "my gawd, you don't know how strong you are!" She gave him a coy look as she rubbed the arm he relinquished. "D'you think I'm talkin' to you like this for fun?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, turning his head away.

Ruby glanced quickly around to make sure that no one was in the corridor, drew close and pressed his arm.

"Harve," she said, putting tenderness and sympathy in the words, "I like you too well to stand by an' say nothin'; you're worth fifty Tom Wingers!" She watched him in silence for a minute, then: "Harve, you ain't mad at me, are you?" She contrived a little

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choking cry, and the ready tears ran down her cheeks.

Astonished and disturbed, Harvey slipped an awkward arm over her shoulder. She lifted her face, her moist black eyes yearning for comfort, and the next instant he kissed her.

"Oh, Harve!" she gasped, pushing him away in simulated fright and startled modesty. Her pink and white beauty, her tumbled black hair, the clinging of her red lips, the moment's pressure of her full curves against his body and her swift withdrawal sent the blood racing through Harvey's veins. He snatched her into his arms again, kissed her furiously. Really alarmed now, Ruby struggled from his embrace. Panting, half angry, half pleased, she whispered:

"My gawd, Harve!"

It was the first of a number of meetings between them before Harvey finished his threshing season east of Walnut Creek. He had promised to stop at the Engel farm to thresh two small stacks before going home, and he pulled his outfit in on a Saturday morning in November. By mid-afternoon the job was done. The crew was given an early supper, he paid the men and Engel drove them to Big Grove.

The time came for Harvey to drive to Thunder Creek. But he lingered. He wanted to go to Nan, talk with her as she moved about her household tasks, cool and serene, listen to her account of what she had been doing; but Nan had steadfastly refused to see

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him. Every time he called, Susan Dines told him bluntly:

"It ain't no use, she won't come out of her room."

"Nan ain't never loved me," he told himself miserably. "She ain't never cared for anybody but that damn Winger, an' I was a green fool to think she did!" Dimly aware of the vital differences between Nan and himself, he thought bitterly:

"She ain't my kind."

Yet he had no intention of giving her up.

He was conscious of a dumb desire to dominate her, crush her, make her his "body and soul"—as the wise ones had done with their women long before he was born! But deep within him was a fear of Nan's unconquerable spirit, a stirring of hatred against what he could not command. To this turgid, sick emotion Ruby's animal appeal, her meek submission to his rough ways came as a relief. They understood one another.

Instead of leaving at once, Harvey mumbled something about having to "tinker around that old separator" and went out into the gathering twilight. As he expected, Ruby followed, and they sat close together against the new strawpile, snugly sheltered from the wind.

After a pretended resistance to Harvey's importunities, the girl yielded to the fierce pressure of his arms with a flattering sigh of contentment, a caressing mumble of words, out of which emerged:

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"Gee, I bet Nan would have a cat fit if she was to see us now!"

It was her pæan of triumph, marred somewhat by Harvey's sudden shrinking. She lifted her head to bring her eyes close to his and went on seductively:

"She's been cold to you, Harve; an' a great big man like you needs a lot of lovin', don't he?" Her heavily-scented hair brushed his cheek.

"Yes, love me, Ruby!" Harvey spoke with a sort of doleful eagerness, burying his face in her breast.

"Listen, Harve-lovey," she cooed, "if they's a chance in the world for you an' Nan to make up some day, I won't ever see you again."

Harvey answered her challenge, after an extended silence, slowly and in disconnected sentences:

"I been thinkin', Ruby, she ain't the woman for me. She'd always be tryin' to run it over me. . . . Some are like that. If you let 'em, they'll keep on runnin' it over you. . . . You got to do somethin' to 'em, but I don't know—I mean, what could I do? Folks is on her side. . . . See what I mean, Ruby?"

"Uh-huh: yeh, I know, Harve-lovey." Her sympathetic lips pressed Harvey's.

"She ain't the woman for me," Harvey repeated, and became more definite: "Yet I don't see"—he was finding it hard to renounce Nan, even as he held Ruby in his arms—"unless I was to pull up an' clear out of this damned country!"

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"What!" The suggestion was surprising, exciting.

"Yes," he affirmed, "pull out an' go back up to Kansas. Leave the whole dern works. . . . I'll do it, too, if you'll come along with me."

"Go to Kansas with you?" Harvey's proposal woke no joyous outcry; she thought: "I wonder if the poor rube believes I'd go an' live with him on a Kansas farm?" But this was not a moment in which to indulge the luxury of honest speech; and her tone was soft as she protested:

"Aw, Harve-lovey, you don't mean you want poor little me to go with you?"

"Yes, sure I do, dearie," he insisted, bringing out the term of endearment with difficulty. "You understand me, an'—aw, we'd have a great time together!" She yielded passively to his awkward caresses, thinking hard while she encouraged him to enlarge on his grievances against Nan, and boast about what he could accomplish in Kansas, where he had grown up. When he had talked himself out, she said crisply:

"Listen, Harve-lovey: I won't go with you. But you go ahead, an' after you've got settled there, an' if you still want me, I'll come. See, it's a sort of"—she was searching her mind for the phrase she wanted—"test of our love. Ain't it, Harve-lovey?" Her kiss, warm and lingering, stirred him to resolution:

"I'll do it!" Then he sighed, allowing Ruby to get

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to her feet and pull him upright with no more than a faint-hearted protest.

"I got to go back to the house now," she whispered. "Ma'll be out lookin' for us!" She ran heavily from him, vanishing from sight in the darkness, and he went to the barn for his team.

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CHAPTER XXVII

GRAY DECEMBER

CHESTER and Julia Forest arrived for a visit two days before Christmas. While Julia entered energetically with Nan upon the task of preparing for the Thunder Creek school celebration, Susan Dines gave her brother an account of what had been going on.

"Nancy an' Harve's quarreled," she said; "an' Harve went off to Kansas to his brother's about ten days ago. Seems he didn't leave no word when he was comin' back—not even with Vergil. . . . There's been some talk of him gettin' mixed up with that Engel gal, though I don't think there's any cause for worry on that score. Still, Nancy says she's never goin' to make it up with Harve. It ain't just a case of sweethearts quarrelin'; she tells me she's goin' on teachin' school an' forget him."

Impulsive as always, Forest went straight to Nan, a glitter of protest in his small blue eyes.

"What about you an' Harvey bustin' up?" he demanded.

"Listen, Dad," she replied quietly, putting her hand on his arm. "I'm miserably unhappy over it, but I

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can't marry Harvey; he's so—so unjust, so jealous and angry, and—"

"Jealous!" Forest cried. "Good gracious, ain't that natural? Don't it show he loves you? Nancy, what's wrong?"

"It's so hard to make you see, Dad, and"—she watched with a mounting flood of tenderness the distress in her father's face and swiftly put her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek against his—"I'm not sure, sometimes, sometimes I think I'm wrong, but I just couldn't be happy with him."

"I see," he muttered, catching in his loving sympathy for her a glimpse of the truth that Nan had not acknowledged, "it's because you don't love him?"

"Partly, Dad," she whispered. "Just don't talk about him any more, will you?"

"Of course not, Nancy, but—well, you've got me for awhile, anyway, me an' Julia," and Nan played the dear old game of easing her father's distress and gaining consolation for herself by making him feel that he was her haven of refuge.

Gaining strength, Tom Winger joined Bill Ridge at W-R ranch headquarters. He did not know whether the rumor he had heard of Nan's refusing to see Harvey was true or not, and he waited, with what patience he could, a sign from her, some definite assurance that she was free. His creed was simple: "If a fellow makes a play for a girl an' loses out, he forgets her, he sure don't try to bust up her engage-

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ment to the other man!" So he kept away, avoiding any chance of meeting Nan, though his hunger for her warm quick smile, the clasp of her fingers, the sight of her forward-thrusting, graceful, lithe and erect body, the deliciously curving cheeks and throat, the sunset hair, the joyous light of her eyes, grew stronger. Nothing could blot out the memory of her few given kisses, the quivering of her arms around his neck, the shy confession of her love during their own brief betrothal.

Nan, too, was waiting—and hoping—for a sign from Tom.

Meanwhile, at his brother's farm in Kansas, Harvey was striving desperately to map a future that would satisfy his confused desires. As he thought and planned, he fell more deeply into a tangle of resentments and longings.

If he believed that he could forget Nan by driving a hundred miles and undertaking to establish himself anew in the community where he had spent his boyhood, he was doomed to disappointment. Frankly puzzled by Harvey's manner and annoyed by his morose silence, George Stokes drove him to Estonia on a Saturday to meet the neighbors and find out what farms were for sale. On that little town's patched plank sidewalks, bordering a main street of half frozen black mud, George's friends formed in small groups; they shook hands with Harvey limply, pretending to remember him; they shifted restlessly on cold feet,

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coughed, spat effusively and noisily; they elaborated tepid jokes, cursed the railroads and the Democratic administration at Washington; and bragged of their run-down farms. Estonia was no longer the fascinating town of Harvey's remembered boyhood. It seemed a dull, cheerless place. He hated it, and was quickly convinced that not in Kansas would he find the solution of his troubles. He laughed bitterly as he thought of what would happen should he send for Ruby Engel and ask her to settle down here with him on one of the tired, weed-infested farms that were for sale.

"She'd fly the coop in six months!"

As the days passed, and he went perfunctorily to look at one after another overvalued place, he grew certain that if he meant to put Nan out of his life and thoughts, forget Thunder Creek and marry Ruby, he must get clear away from family and friends. His mind turned to a sentence in Ruby's letter referring to her vague plan to join Kate Hayes in Denver, and he wrote to her:

"Looks like they ain't nothin up here for me. Its a wore out country. . . . I wisht you was allreddy at Denver an could tell me about how things is out there. Maybe Ill trail on out there before long."

That bit from Harvey's letter cheered Ruby. It would simplify her problem if she could "hit Denver

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with Harve," if he could be persuaded to sell out his interests in the long grass country and take her to that alluring metropolis. With the idea of furthering this plan, she lied outrageously in her answer:

"Harve, I guess you wouldnt make no mistake to figure on Denver an the sooner the better. You sure wouldnt want to hang around here to watch whats goin on between Nan an Tom Winger. . . . You know I aint suspicious an wouldnt say a word agin anybody's reputation, but—Nan's teachin now at the new schoolhouse an if you knowed how often that Nigger horse of Toms an Chiquita stands hitched together at the schoolhouse after all the scholars is gone, sometimes till after dark—well, Harve I dont need to rite no more along that line!"

As he read Ruby's insinuations, his first reaction was anger.

"She's lyin', Nan wouldn't do that!" Then came the after-effect of those ugly words upon his morbid mind. The letter seemed to come alive in his inner vest pocket and burn through his shirt; its evil implications seemed to penetrate his very skin and light a dull, hurting fire deep inside him; and out of the dank smolder of misery and despairing, jealous anger an acrid fog arose to cloud his eyes. . . . He found that he must move slowly, watch his tongue to pre-

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vent an outbreak of mad rage that would astonish Brother George and his wife and set the neighbors to gossiping avidly.

Twenty-four hours of this silent torture, of a shattering alternation of doubt and certainty, anger and despair, drove Harvey to action. He resolved to go back at once to Thunder Creek, confront Winger and "settle things" with Nan. Early in the afternoon of December twenty-third, he rose from his seat in front of the living-room stove and went to hitch his grays to his buggy. George came out to ask:

"Where you goin', Harve?" and was relieved to hear:

"I'm goin' home."

"What's your hurry?"

"Well, I figure on pullin' in for Christmas," Harvey managed a bleak smile. "You know how it is."

Turned homeward, the grays stepped out willingly; their swinging trot reminded Harvey that if he cared to he could get home on Christmas Eve, in time for the celebration Nan had planned to hold in the schoolhouse—he felt a sudden, poignant yearning for Nan, recalling with sickening vividness her bright beauty and imagining for one deluded moment a joyous, repentant, "Harvey, you have come back!"

But he knew such hopes were groundless. He must face the facts: Nan had jilted him, definitely, high-handedly, without giving him a chance to say he was sorry; and he was committed to Ruby—"an', anyway," the thought of Ruby fled and the picture of Nan returned to torment him, "that damned Winger's got

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her!" His muddled brain chased that thought tiringly round and round.

Presently, nursing his misery, sick with self-pity as he drove through the gray December afternoon, he slumped against the side supports of his buggy top. It was after dark when he realized the necessity of stopping to feed and rest his team and find a bed for himself. He pulled into a little huddle of frame houses, flanking a railroad, turned his grays over to a grumbling man with a lantern at the town's livery stable, ate a cold supper at the cheerless story-and-a-half frame house that called itself an hotel. He sought vainly to divert his mind from his troubles by watching noisy young farmers shoot pool in an overheated, tobacco-juice stained shanty, then shivered to bed between thin blankets in a room filled with sounds of rattling windows and soughing wind. He was irritated because sleep would not come and blot out his misery, tossed and twisted, cursed. . . . He was up as the first streak of dawn illuminated the frost patterns on the panes.

In a fever of impatience, he quitted the town, and noon found him at Homeville, only twenty miles from Thunder Creek. He stabled the team, ate at the railroad restaurant and went forth to tramp the length of the one long residence street while the grays rested.

Occasional glimpses of Christmas preparations distracted his eye—window wreaths of cedar and greenbriar, bound with lavish bows of red ribbon; packages

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going in from laden delivery wagons; piles of paper, cardboard and excelsior in the alleys; trees on front porches ready to be taken inside and set up. Through one uncurtained window, he saw a young woman busy about a tree already decorated with cotton, silver paper and fuzzy gilt cord. She moved around it with an obvious happy swiftness, pushing chairs back against the wall, bestowing superfluous caresses upon the objects she was placing in the branches. He stopped to watch her, and into his heart crept envy of the man who would see that tree lighted after supper. . . . If he hadn't made a fool of himself, he and Nan might, some day—but now he had lost her to Tom Winger!

Probably at this very minute Winger was at the schoolhouse helping Nan fix up the big tree; it would be like him. Not only was the fellow in love with Nan, but he had the same "damfool hankerin' for mindin' other folks's business." He raged:

"Damn him, he had to mix in on mine; got himself shot by 'Buster' Hayes boastin' he was doin' me a service. I could've took care of 'Buster' without him!"

With no definite idea, but burning with his sense of injury and a growing longing to "get even," Harvey turned into a hardware store to spend twenty dollars for a heavy forty-five caliber revolver and a box of cartridges.

At two o'clock he had his rested grays hitched up, and drove south over the long, half-frozen, twisting prairie road, leading to Thunder Creek. The new

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loaded pistol was under an end of the seat cushion, and the impression of its menace lay heavy in Harvey's mind.

The rutted road made bad going for the grays. Harvey slowed them to a walk. After all, he had better not hurry—better take it easy and figure out just what he ought to do. . . . But it was hard to think with a dull roaring in his ears and a hot phrase, "damn 'em, damn 'em!" dancing through his brain. Twilight fell before he reached Abel Madden's place.

He heard a wagon pull into the road ahead of him and rattle off towards the schoolhouse—Abel and his family starting for the celebration. He let them get well ahead, following slowly, at grips with the devil inside him.

Many teams stood hitched to the scattering black-jacks surrounding Thunder Creek schoolhouse. Light from the frosted window panes revealed the Dines team and spring wagon, filled with hay behind the seat. Harvey stopped his grays alongside.

What next? He didn't know; he sat rigidly in the buggy, dimly hearing voices, laughter, the sound of shuffling feet in the schoolhouse. He could see nothing of what was going on behind the steam-obscured windows. He waited, shaken with a sudden tense excitement.

There came a momentary silence, followed by the sound of a man's voice that he vaguely recognized (Ches Forest was making his Santa Claus speech and preparing to give out the presents). The monologue

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ceased, and he heard shouts, laughter, clapping, stamping—in the midst of the din, the door opened and two persons emerged into the cold, sharp winter night. Nan was one, and the other—Tom Winger!

Sitting with Nan in the group formed by the Dineses, the Forests and Vergil and Jennie Stokes, Tom had suggested as Ches ended his speech:

"Let's go an' see how the tree looks from the outside, Nan." She flung a scarf over her shoulders and they went out, moving from window to window seeking an unclouded pane through which to look. Harvey saw Tom tap on a pane; some one inside wiped away the moisture; and their faces, close together, were pressed to the glass.

With a half-instinctive, half-remembered gesture, Tom's hand sought and grasped one of Nan's. The touch sent a thrill of keen, heart-stirring delight through her, a rush of warmth to her face, a glow of tenderness to her breast. But—

"Your hand's frozen, Tom!" she exclaimed, her voice trembling; "you must go in, you'll catch your death out here; you're not well yet."

"Wait a minute, Nan," he pleaded; "I haven't had a chance to see you alone for one minute since your dad fetched me home to supper. . . . Say, did you know I was comin'?"

"No, I was so surprised when you came riding in."

"I didn't know I was comin', either, till your dad

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swore he'd keep on pesterin' me until I agreed to come an' listen to what his wife had to say about that fraternal order he's goin' to start in Big Grove. . . . I wasn't sure you'd want to see me."

"So—do you feel sure now?" Nan whispered happily. Tom leaned swiftly to kiss her.

"Ah, Nan—sweetheart!" he cried; "I was so hungry for you—"

Harvey saw Nan's lips raised to Tom's; he saw her close in his embrace; and his hand reached for the pistol. He dragged it from under the cushion as Nan, urging, "You must come in at once!" broke from Tom's arms.

Harvey watched the two pass from sight around the corner of the schoolhouse, and leaped from the buggy, cocking the pistol, a choking, thumping sensation in his chest.

At the door, Tom seized the hand Nan put out to turn the knob.

"Wait, Nan," he whispered eagerly. For another blessed, intoxicating moment she was pressed close, and her breathless murmur, "Ah, Tom, Tom!" stirred him to exultation. Then, in a joyous whirl, she pushed him back, crying:

"Now—now, you *must* go inside!" She opened the door and literally forced him across the sill ahead of her.

As she did so, echoing his low laugh of protest, Harvey strode around the corner, thrust himself be-

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tween Nan and the doorway, slammed shut the door. He turned to her, standing dumb with astonishment, and grabbed her wrist with his left hand.

"Come here," he said thickly, "I got somethin' to say to you."

Startled, but not frightened, for she could not see the pistol he held behind his back, she yielded to his pull; but when they were almost at the team she tried to wrench herself free and cried out:

"Let me go! What do you want?"

Harvey faced her, shaking, his thick, square bulk menacing as that of a mad bull.

"You goin' to marry me?" he demanded, the words spilling out in a barely intelligible rush.

"No!" she answered angrily and, as his fingers tightened their cruel grip on her wrist: "Let me go, Harvey, you're hurting me!" At that the hand holding the heavy pistol swung round, and he shrieked insanely, hysterically:

"Then, by God, you won't marry him, either!" and with the shrill threat death, sudden, horrible, coming out of a blaze, a roar, an instant's acrid stench of burned powder, leaped from the muzzle of the shaking weapon. Nan screamed, spun halfway round, slumped.

Tom turned round at the noise of the slamming door, puzzled at not seeing Nan; he waited a moment, then stepped out, looked for her, amazed and startled—her voice crying, "Let me go!" guided him; he saw Nan

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struggling to pull away from Harvey, made one wild, long leap and clutched at the pistol the instant of its explosion. He saw Nan go down. In a cold, sick, fury, in an agony at the thought that the madman's bullet had found her breast, he wrenched Harvey's arm violently upward and backward, both of his hands on the gun, and the next bullet tore its way through Harvey's jaw and into his brain. The heavy body collapsed out of his grasp. Tom ran to Nan. Carrying her, he met the rush from the schoolhouse.

"He's killed her—oh, Christ, he's killed her!" Tom's sobbing, despairing words galvanized Susan Dines to instant action and speech:

"Here," she ordered, flying back through the doorway, "put her down. Billy, spread your coat here." She pointed to the floor under the big hanging lamp. "Julia, come here; everybody else stand back—get out!" She was on her knees beside Nan as Tom put her down, working swiftly to strip the girl's scorched and bullet-torn dress away. She bared the firm young breasts, explored with anxious eyes and flying fingers. Then triumphantly:

"She ain't hurt. It's only scratched her. Julia, bring a dipper of water."

Julia Forest rose as if shot upward on springs and her exultant, "She's all right!" reached Tom's ears.

Nan came to herself with a shuddering outcry, still obsessed by the lightning melodrama that had swept upon her, still feeling Harvey's painful grip on her

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wrist and hearing the deafening crash of the pistol held so close to her heart.

"It's all right, honey lamb," her aunt's arms were about her, the familiar voice soothing her as she trembled and clutched the old woman. "It's all right now," the comforting voice went on, "you're safe with Aunty, just you keep still, nobody's goin' to hurt you, any more." Susan Dines was struggling to blink back the tears threatening to blind her. Her eyes wide, and dark with the near shadow of death, Nan whispered:

"Harvey—he was—he was trying to—" her voice broke into a frightened wail.

"But he didn't, honey lamb!" her aunt cried. "Tom got there in time."

"Is—is Tom hurt?"

"No, thank God!" The old woman leaned impulsively to press her cheek against Nan's face.

"Ah!" she sighed, closed her eyes and sought with a trembling hand one of her aunt's. Julia and her father came to kneel beside her and comfort her.

"Ches," Susan Dines whispered, "bring the spring wagon, an—"

"And Harvey—what happened?" Nan faltered. Billy Dines gave his wife a look and a sign, and she answered:

"He won't ever trouble you again, honey lamb."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

BEGINNING

A SWEET May breeze singing in her ears as she stood before the open window of the Dines kitchen, Nan was helping her aunt and Julia Forest prepare the wedding feast. There were chickens to pluck, dried apples and apricots to wash for pies, a huge chocolate layer cake to make, to be baked with a ring in it, potatoes and turnips to be brought in from the dwindling straw-and-earth mound under which they had been stored against winter frosts—a multitude of pleasant tasks to be got through before tomorrow, when she would meet Tom at the Little Walnut schoolhouse, stand beside him in her bridal white and answer the question of the Big Grove preacher whom Aunty Hardwick was to bring out.

Carrying two pails to the garden, she breathed with delight the warm odors of the carefully cultivated vegetable patch, of the fresh plowing in the young corn. She stood for a minute watching the hens scratching and wallowing luxuriously in dust baths beside the fence. A southward sloping field of half-grown wheat unrolled like a vivid green carpet to the lighter green of the far-stretching prairie. Beyond the wheat field, Nan saw Sam Davis plodding steadily down a corn

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row on her father's leasehold and heard faintly his mechanical "git-along-there-Pete!"

It was the end of one epoch in her life, the beginning of another. To-morrow she would be Mrs. Tom Winger—a thrilling shiver of happiness raced through her at the thought—mistress of the new house Tom had built to replace the dug-out as headquarters of the W-R ranch, the house he had started to build the very day after Christmas, while Nan lay in her little darkened room struggling to conquer the reactions of horror. . . .

Five years since she came with her mother and father to settle alongside Aunt Susan and Uncle Billy. Long, full years they had been, bringing rapid changes to her, to her father, to all those she knew except her aunt and uncle, to the long grass country itself; and they had prepared the scene for even swifter changes. A good time to begin a new life, fall into step with the new generation intent on new tasks!

As she came back to the kitchen porch, the scents of outdoors were lost in a rush of enticing odors from the burdened cooling shelf under the open window.

"Aunty," she cried, "Tom'll be here in a few minutes! We're going riding, and he'll want some of your cookies, and I'm not ready, and Chiquita's still out in the pasture, and here's a pail of potatoes to peel, and—oh, Tom's coming!" She dropped her burden, rushed upon her aunt and flung her arms tightly around the old woman.

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Susan kissed her, smiled at her radiant face and advised:

"For land's sake, run along an' get ready, an' don't worry about what's to be done here. What do you think Julia came all the way from Texas for except to help me?"

Dressed for her last delightful ride as Miss Nan Forest across the golden prairie with Tom, she met him at the gate, took his hand as he dropped his reins and slid from the saddle.

"Aunty's got something for you, Tom," she teased, looking up happily into his dancing eyes. "Come quick, or they'll be cold." But he stopped her before they reached the kitchen, drawing her into the spick and span front room.

"I know, cookies!" he laughed. She was in his arms, he was holding her in a straining embrace, his lips on her. "Nan, Nan," he whispered, "I just want to hold you like this forever an' forever, never let you go again!" An ecstasy of surrender was in her veins as his words caressed her ears.

"Oh, Tom," she breathed, "you do love me, don't you! And I—" She broke from his arms and danced away, calling to Susan Dines:

"Keep him busy, Aunty, while I go out and help Dad saddle Chiquita."

They rode to Coyote Ridge, to watch the sunset from its highest point, her hand in his, Chiquita and Tom's Nigger ambling along as they pleased. When

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they reached the crest they stopped, and Tom pointed to a new board shanty and a wagon standing far down on the slope toward Little Walnut Creek.

"See, Nan," he said, "another leaser! That's Joe Shady an' his wife; they're leasin' from Henry Bear. They're comin'—nesters, haymen, cattlemen—an' it won't be long before all this fine free range 'll be gone."

"What 'll you do then, Tom," Nan smiled at her lover, "be a farmer?"

"I won't have to think about that for a while yet," he answered. "But I could think of worse things than bein' a farmer!" He laughed. "One of these days, the Indians'll be argued into allottin' all these miles an' miles of prairie, like them Kansas politicians are tryin' to make 'em do now. Then there'll be land for sale, an' the Indians'll have to buckle down to farmin' an' cattle raisin' to keep even with us white folks. Good thing for 'em, too."

"Yes," Nan agreed, "Uncle Billy says Indians like Chief Littlespring, Ross Murray and 'Sofkey' Horseford are already showing the way to the others. Uncle Billy likes these Indians; he says they're as smart as anybody—no reason why they shouldn't move ahead with the rest of us."

"An' they sure will," Tom asserted. "At the bank in Big Grove they're already beginnin' to open accounts, make loans an' carry on like regular fellows."

They turned back as the sun flickered down behind a distant prairie ridge.

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"Reckon your Dad an' Julia'll ever come back here to live?" Tom asked.

"He says not," Nan answered. "He says he's going to give his lease to me, but I expect it 'll really be Sam Davis's. . . . Sam's going to preach at the Little Walnut schoolhouse!"

"No!" Tom laughed, then observed gravely: "Sam's all right, he's heard a call an' he's goin' to follow it. That's the stuff."

"And," Nan went on, "old man Tall Bear, Henry's father, is going to preach there, too, turn and turn about with Sam, every other Sunday. I've thought I'd like to have him help marry us; do you think he would?"

"Leave it to me," Tom said, smiling at the suggestion. "I'm strong for that myself. I'll see him on my way back to the ranch to-night."

They idled along, reins slack, hand in hand; the talk fell away from serious discussion of the future to the more engrossing subject of themselves and their happiness; they came in late for supper, to meet with beatific smiles Uncle Billy's jibes and Aunt Susan's mocking, lively rendering of two lines from the old jingle:

> "I'm goin' to get married, ma-ma, ma-ma.
> I'm goin' to get married, ha-ha, ha-ha!"

"Don't let 'em tease, you, Nancy," said Ches Forest, grinning, "me an' Julia knows how it is!"

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With her father, Julia and Susan and Billy Dines —the four people in the world besides Tom who meant most to her—Nan drove up the curving road from Little Walnut ford and came into the clearing among the blackjacks and to the schoolhouse. A hand-waving, smiling and self-conscious crowd greeted them. On the huge log step in front of the door with Tom stood the bearded minister from Big Grove, Mrs. Hardwick, Sam Davis and Tall Bear. The Indian preacher wore a collarless blue shirt, a short black coat, yellow trousers and weather-stained moccasins; he was completely at ease, smiling, exchanging friendly comment with his Indian neighbors who had come to the wedding. By contrast, the Reverend Homer Hillhouse seemed portentous and Sam Davis, in unaccustomed white shirt, collar and black bow tie, stiff and solemn. . . .

The hush came, the moment when Nan and Tom in turn pronounced, "I do." The Big Grove preacher made his prayer, Tall Bear stood up to lift his hand, and his big son Henry rose to say:

"I will interpret what the old man says."

Following an impressive silence, came the words:

"He says he is glad to ask God's blessing on this man an' this woman because he loves them both. . . . He says times has changed since he was a young man like him an' his old woman was a girl like her an' they got married out in the woods, but he ain't sorry old ways are goin', because we got to have new ways an'

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good men an' women from the outside to help build up this Eenyan country. . . . He says the same Great Father loves this girl Nancy an' this man Tom that loves his old woman an' him. . . . He says he gives his blessing on this marriage. Amen."

Sam Davis's halting, tangled prayer ended with a fervent:

"Lord, may they walk in happiness!" It brought tears to Nan's eyes.

The ceremony over, a rattling, shouting procession streamed back from the schoolhouse to the Dines home. They crowded kitchen, front room, the two porches, overflowed into the yard under the young maple trees, and wrought havoc with all the good things provided. Gay, eager, laughing, boisterous, they mobbed Nan and Tom. The grand climax came as the sun sank low and men began to think of evening chores: Gabe Horner mounted a chair and roared:

"Folks, let's give a good old cowboy yell for Nan and Tom!" The voices of "Sandy" MacLaren, Cox, Bill Ridge and Paul Dunkin broke into a shrill, hair-raising whoop, joyous and unrestrained.

There were kisses for Nan, quick, hard handclasps and good-luck thumps for Tom, an avalanche of sound and movement as bride and groom struggled through the press to Tom's waiting buggy. They were off. . . .

When the fast-trotting team had turned the corner of the Dines horse pasture and he could make himself heard, Tom asked:

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"Sweetheart, you're sure you'd rather just come home than go off to Kansas City?"

"Sure!" Nan repeated, turning radiant eyes up to her husband. "Oh, Tom, it's good to be going home—with you."

"Good, you bet!" he pressed her closer as the horses fell into their steady, unhurried trot. Her response was an all but inaudible murmur—a low, private, happy burst of sound very near his ear.

They were silent for a time, then Tom spoke, slowly and in a tone of prophecy:

"Home an' our work, Nan. We're elected now to help make this long grass country one of the greatest states in the Union, you an' me an' the folks we know an' them that's comin' after us." He broke off to ask in a lighter tone: "Do you realize that, Mrs. Winger?"

"I do—Mr. Winger," she laughed, and their impulsive, fervent kiss sealed their dedication to the land they loved.

They crossed Little Walnut and drove up the long gentle slope toward the swelling, gully-scarred limestone bluff, with its fringe of scrub oaks, persimmon, plum and haw bushes, near the top of which Tom had built his house.

"Why, Tom," Nan exclaimed when they came in sight of it, "you've got the house painted!" In the light of the setting sun it glinted white and splendid.

"Sure have; finished slappin' on the last coat yes-

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terday mornin'. Like it?" He pulled up the team at the gate in the new picket fence.

"It's beautiful, Tom," Nan rewarded him with a shining look, then slipped to the ground, to stand waiting while he tied the horses and opened the gate. She lifted her arms to clasp them around his neck. "Carry me in, Tom—for luck!"

With his wife in his arms, Tom crossed the wide porch, stepped through the door of his home to the new life, the new happiness that awaited them.

(1)

THE END

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